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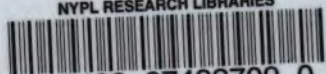
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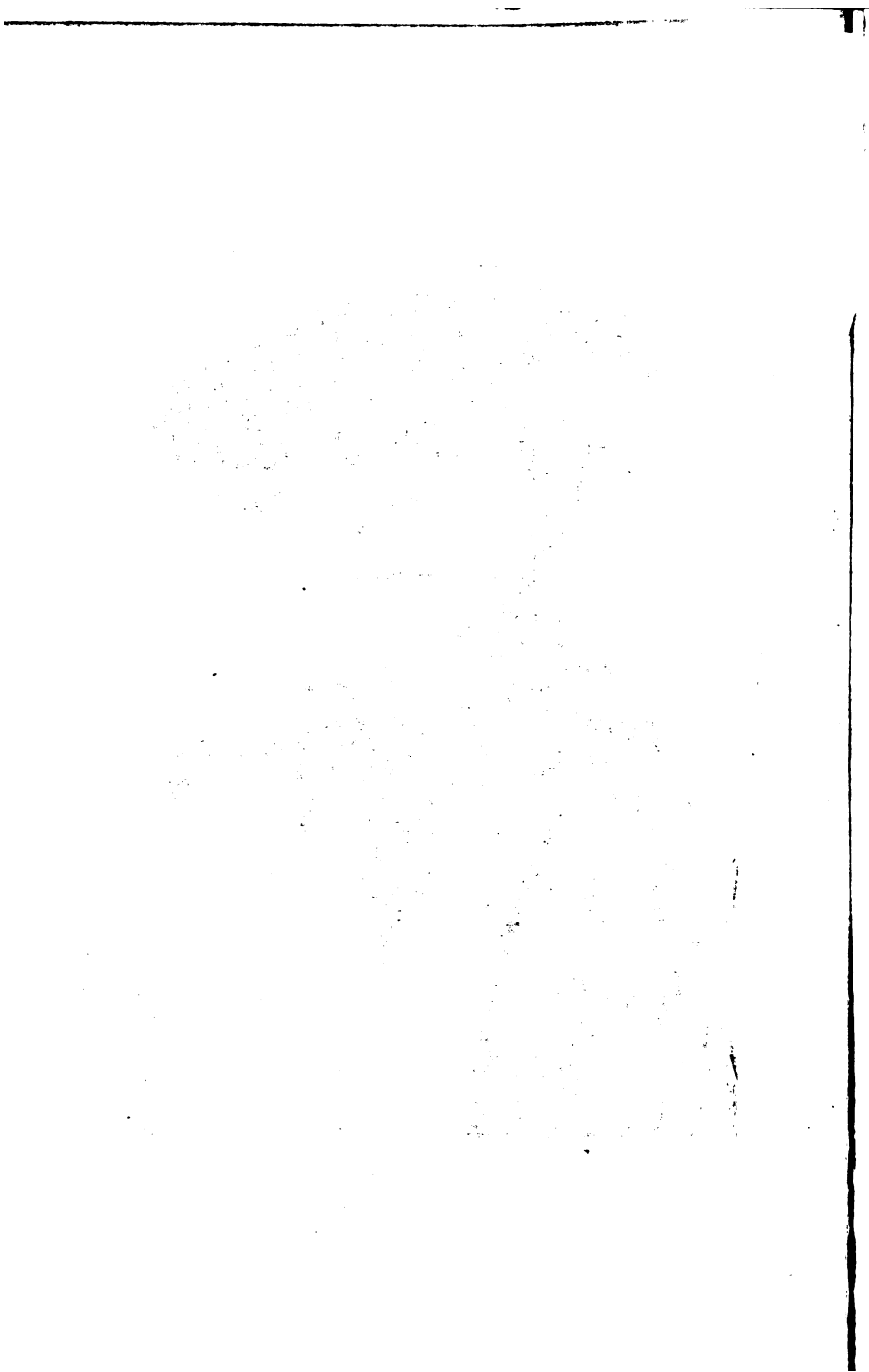


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LARKIN COTTON RUN

WILLIAM TEMPLER BECKER

J. M. Cronquist
July 26, 1914



LARKIN OF COTTON RUN

BY

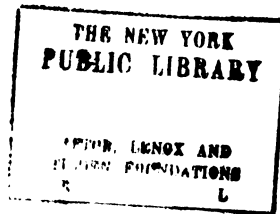
WILLIAM TEMPLER BECKER

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TO ALL THOSE
WHO LOVE THE SIMPLE LIFE AND THE
GREAT OUT-OF-DOORS
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

W. T. B.

Chickamickmuck Lodge.

May, 1913.

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Larkin of Cotton Run

CHAPTER I.

Mr. Peter Bannister, neighborhood business-minder and harmless old gossip, sat on a shoe box in the back end of the village store, chewing tobacco with an ease and grace born of half a century's indulgence in the habit. He spat, too, with unerring precision, into the dead ashes that appeared on the damperless hearth of the rusty box stove, gazing the while with interest at the precise spot where each succeeding ejection found a place, rolling his eyes toward the door whenever it opened to admit a newcomer,—for it was “mail night,” and there was sure to be a good “flooring on” at the store this mild October evening.

Mr. Bannister was in a reminiscent mood. He had a habit of indulging in retrospect, especially on those particular occasions when he arrived early and had been obliged, by force of circumstances, to actually keep his tongue still for a time, for lack of an audience. By those who knew him and who loved to listen to his rippling flow of reminiscence, pathos, humor, and quaint, rustic philosophy, it was considered a good thing not to disturb Peter's meditations,

for, by allowing him to take his own time, he would break silence at the proper time, and the waiting would be rewarded. So, the droppers-in at the store invariably held aloof until Mr. Bannister, having thrown his worn-out quid into the ashes, drew a plug from his pocket and proceeded to worry off a fresh mouthful with his few remaining teeth. Then men began to draw near, and soon the chairs, boxes and barrels near the oracle were all occupied, and Peter was in his glory.

As a general thing, men first inquired for their mail, after which such expressions as,—“Gallon New Erleans,” “Gimme paper tobacker,” “Spool o’ white cotton No. 40,” “Wat yeh payin’ fur aigs?” “Sold yer hay?” “When’s Hank Stevens’s huskin’ bee?” etc., until all mail had been distributed and all purchases made. Then, for an hour of quiet gossiping and newsmongering with old Bannister as the central figure of the group.

On this particular evening, Mr. Bannister had been left so long alone that he was becoming uneasy. He had several minutes before renewed his cud, and had already turned the sweet morsel over and over again, that he might enjoy it to the fullest extent, sighing softly the while he turned his shrewd old eyes on the crowd that should, before this, have gravitated toward his seat.

Bill Poole addressed the storekeeper, ‘as he received his weekly quarter pound of “fine cut.”

“Mellerin’?” he queried, with a jerk of his head toward the stove.

“B’en there most an hour,” was the response.

“Good,” ejaculated Poole, as he sauntered back to where Bannister was sitting.

“Good evening, Peter,” he said, as he dropped down upon a mackerel kit. “Nice night, ain’t it?”

"You said it was, now what's the use of askin' me it 'tain't?" returned Bannister.

Poole laughed good-naturedly, and the crowd drew near, each individual disposing of himself to best advantage; those not fortunate enough to secure something to sit upon, lounging in comfortable attitudes against the counters.

The oracle resumed speech.

"They ain't much sense to weather-talk, anyhow," he drawled. "Most everybody talks some of it, which some of 'em uses variations. I knowed a feller once thet always said, 'It's a cold day, do yeh know it?' which was kind o' edifyin' and refreshin', an' out of the usual line. Sometimes one gits fetched up standin', volunteerin' information on the weather. Ther' was wunst a dude of a feller from Schenact'dy ust to be hangin' around old Uncle Billy Jackson's gal, Agnes, up in Duanesbush. Wa'al, one fine Sat'dy in hayin', this 'ere dude, which Uncle Billy didn't have any mortal use fer, was up there, dawdlin' round the gals, an' he took it in his head to go down to the field where Uncle Billy was mowin' long the fence. He hed on checkered britches an' a white vest, an' held a numberel over his head, which he didn't have no hat on, 'cause his hair was parted in the middle, and he wanted people to know it.

"Old man Jackson hed two kinds of religion. To be perfec'ly safe fer this world an' the next, a man het to belong to the Wackubite church, and het to dig right into the hard work ev'ry day in the year. 'I'd ruther be called a thief than be called lazy,' I've heerd him say lots of times. Wa'al, 's I was sayin', when Uncle Billy seen this 'ere Schenact'dy feller with his numberel an' his checkered britches comin', it made him madder'n a wet hen, an' he didn't look up ner nothin,' but kep' on whackin' at the golden-rod an' berry bushes 'long the fence. The dude

sa'nters up, an' pullin' out a han'kercher, wipes the perspiration from his brow, an' says, 'Nice day. Mr. Jackson.' 'Yes,' sez old Billy, snappin' out the words like breakin' sticks. 'Dum nice day fur them's got work to do,' and' he never looks up, but mows right on, leavin' the dude wonderin' what he meant, which he don't to this day I guess."

"Did the dude marry the girl?" asked a younger member of the group.

"No. He didn't shine round Agnes no more, after that. Uncle Billy wouldn't hev him comin' there talkin' weather, an' the girl didn't care a snap fer him, neither. No, Agnes married John Larkin, who was a north of Ireland Irishman, and as good a worker as old Jackson himself. He was a member of the Wackubite church, too, which was better yet. Larkin's dead now, but his widder's livin'. She's Steve's mother, yeh know."

"Wonder where Steve is to-night," said Poole.

For once Mr. Bannister was out of information, but it was supplied, with eager pride, by another. "Steve went to Rochester day 'fore yesterday fur a car load of blooded stock he'd bought."

"Cur'ous cus, that 'ere Steve," resumed the old gossip. "I call him a dum cur'ous cuss, and he's always be'n so from a boy up. Never made no diff'rence what was put onto Steve, he'd git out from under it somehow, an' in good shape. Once' w'en he was a boy only 'bout six years old, he was fishin' down in old Sandy Tatlock's mill pond. Bimeby he hed a bite which jerked him off the bank in about twenty foot o' water. Steve hollered like a good feller, but stuck to his fish pole. Some fellers come an' got him out, he hangin' onto the pole all the while, which he had an eel on his hook what weighed some seven er eight pound. First thing Steve said when they'd turned him upside down an' emptied

the water out of him, an' kind o' brung him round, was, 'Hev yeh got my fish?' "

"What a whopper!" groaned one of the party!

"Young man," demanded Peter gravely, "a whopper of what?"

"Of 'n eel, course!"

Bannister's face showed strong disgust as the laugh went round, but he continued good-naturedly:

"Steve'll have 'bout forty head of them 'ere Gu'nsey cattle when he gits this car load home and them of you that hain't seen his new cow stable better go up an' look at it. They ain't anything like it in these diggin's."

"All this blooded stock must be costing Steve quite a sum of money," suggested young Ned Palmer from his seat on a salt barrel.

"Fifty to a hundred dollers apiece," said Bannister, swelling with the importance of the information.

"Well, I kind o' like to know where Larkin gits all his money, anyhow," exclaimed Poole. "He hadn't nothin' when he run away from home an' went West first time, an' if he hed anything when he come back what made him go to workin' of one Quirk's lease land farms. Then ag'n, he pops up home one day three year ago, an' pays fifteen thousand dollars in cash fur the best farm in the county, puts up new barns an' stables, an' goes into raisin' blooded cattle. I swan, I can't understand it."

"'Tain't reely necessary that you should, Willyum," drawled Bannister. "'Cause then you'd know as much as Steve does, which might onhinge yer mind."

Waiting for the little ripple of merriment to pass by, Ned Palmer remarked:

"Speaking of what Steve Larkin knows—I think his rapid improvement in speech and manners as

truly remarkable as the mysterious source of his wealth. As Bill says, he apparently brought no great wealth with him on his first return from the west, neither did his speech and general behavior denote, until within the past few years, that he was anything else than the rough, good-natured cowboy we have all seen samples of. He certainly didn't bring his culture from the west."

A tall, fine-looking man, reading under the hanging lamp, lowered his paper and observed quietly:

"In your discussion of our friend Larkin, you all appear to forget that he did bring one thing with him when he returned from the west last time—a wife."

Bannister turned his eyes eagerly toward the last speaker.

"You're dum right, Mr. Selton," he burst out. "Steve did bring home a wife, an' it's my opinion she's be'n the makin' of him. Why, they ain't nothin' that woman can't do. Onc't las' fall I was up there to see Steve, if he wouldn't let me hev some o' them old pine stumps fur kindlin'. Wa'al, Steve wan't home, but his wife was, so the hired girl said. She was gone out in the lot a piece to see somethin' 'bout a Ham'ltonian colt they've got. Airah one of 'em was liable to come any minit, the girl said. So I kind o' hung round the buildin's, waitin'. Pretty soon I hears somethin' comin' down the lane, 'chug-a-chug, a-chug!'—jes' like a steam injin. I looked, an' there come Steve's wife on a spotted mustang, an' him a-puttin' in his best licks. She had on one of them wide-rimmed white hats, like Steve wears. Her hair was kind o' flyin' in the wind, an' she hed two spots jes' like peaches on her cheeks. By dum, she looked good enough to eat.

"I stood there watchin' of her till she got middlin'

nigh the gate, which was shut. Then I begun to hustle fur to open it. But she says, 'Never mind, Mr. Bannister; we can make it.' An' with that, that air mustang riz right up in the air an' come down on my side the gate, nice as yeh please. She slipped down from the saddle, like she was ust to it, an' I offered to take care of the 'tang fer her, though all the time I didn't like the rollin' of his eyes, ner the way he showed the whites of 'em.

"But she wouldn't hev it that way. 'Sancho don't like strangers very well, Mr. Bannister,' says she. 'I'll take him to the stable.' Which she did, all the time pattin' and caressin' of him while she talked to me, askin' after my old woman, an' if I had a good garden this year, an' if I could spare her some of them Crawford peaches what grows on the tree south of my house. When she had got the 'tang cared fer, she says: 'Come in the house, Mr. Bannister. Mr. Larkin will be home soon, and you can see him.' An' I follered her in the house jes's I'd a done if she'd jumped in the crick an' ast me to jump in, too. Ez it wus, she took me in the pootiest settin' room, all flowers, an' picturs, an' sofys, an' big rockin' chairs, an' that air pianny Steve took home shortly after she come.

"Well, she put away her big hat and gloves an' sot an' talked to me like I wus a dominie er a king till Steve come home, which was pooty soon, he havin' be'n down to the river on hossback. He shuck han's with me same's he always hes—Steve don't put on no lugs sence he's riz in the world—and when he'd throwed his wide hat onto the sofy an' sot down, he sez to his wife, 'Play somethin' fer us, dear.'

"'What shell it be?' sez she, very pleasant like.

"'Well, I dunno,' says Steve. 'I'm ruther tired. S'posen you play Baytoven's Moonlight Sonaty.'

"Mis' Larkin didn't seem to think she'd done anything more'n ordinary, an' was turnin' over her music to find another tune, while I was settin' with my mouth open gawpin' at her, when the hired girl come a-runnin' in, a-hollerin': 'O, mam! O, mam! O, mam! They's a big hen hawk tryin' to ketch chickens in the back yard.'

"Steve's wife didn't jump off the stool, she jes' seemed to git to the end of the pianny 'thout any effort 'tall, an' grab one o' them new-fangled britch-loadin' rifles I hadn't seen standin' in there afore, an' me an' Steve follered her out back of the house.

"The hawk had got a chicken an' was a good ways up, when Mis' Larkin p'inted the gun at him, an' bless yer souls! there was a crack like snappin' a whip, and mister hawk come a-changin' ends with hisself ker-flop! on the ground, deader'n a stone! Then I'll be durned ef she didn't go an' pick up that little dead chicken out o' the hawk's claws, an' begin to whimper over it jes' like any other woman.

"I lit out fur home then, tellin' Steve, when he ast me ef he could do anything fur me that I'd come ag'in some other day. Fact is, I hed furgot what I'd come fur."

The crowd had given Bannister rapt attention during his recital, and when he had finished, comments, more or less favorable to Mrs. Larkin were not lacking. Hank Stevens was in the midst of a spirited description of how the lady in question had once turned down a too inquisitive female gossip, when the attention of all was drawn in an entirely new direction.

A man, an entire stranger, had entered the room and was making his way toward the group around the stove. There are many men whose appearance in a crowd of strangers attracts little or no at-

tention. Of the passersby in the street, forty-nine are not even given a glance, but the fiftieth man has something in his face, his figure or his bearing that commands attention, and one finds himself turning to gaze after the stranger, vaguely wondering who and what this man is, where he is going and what his business may be.

Of such impressive personality was the stranger who walked so unceremoniously into the village store at Wyncross that memorable October evening. He was a man of perhaps forty, of more than medium height, and with a figure erect and well-knit.

Almost anyone would have called him a fine-looking man, but the close student of human character could scarcely have failed to detect cruelty, cunning and avarice in every feature of that keen face. From under dense, jutting eyebrows a pair of close-set, black eyes looked shiftily out. The face was pale, almost to ghastliness, and was unrelieved by beard or mustache. Once, while in the room, he removed his cap for an instant, thus displaying a close-cropped head, with several scars seaming the scalp.

The stranger advanced to the middle of the room with quick, short steps, casting glances about as he came, and stopping abruptly addressed himself to Selton.

"Nice night," he said, by way of introduction.

"Very fine," returned Selton, bowing politely, his keen eyes, as was his habit, taking in everything of and about the newcomer. For an instant the gaze of the two men met and the eyes of the stranger shifted to the group about the stove.

"Anyone know a man named Larkin about here?" he asked.

Nearly every one present feeling himself addressed, a babel of affirmatives arose.

"This man's name is Stephen," the stranger ex-

plained. Again a half-dozen voices claimed the honor of imparting information, but as usual, old Bannister obtained precedence and kept his lead.

"Same man," he piped. "Tall, good-lookin', dum nice feller. Ust to be a cowboy. Mebbe you're a relative of Steve's?"

"Mebbe I ain't," retorted the man, a disagreeable smile flitting over his face.

Peter was beaten, but not vanquished. "Ah, then," he said, blandly, "you're a friend of his'n, like 'nough."

The man's expression became absolutely tigerish in its malignance, and it was with evident difficulty that he stifled a motion of impatience.

"I might be," he said, coolly, and, turning to Poole, demanded, "How far does Larkin live from here?"

"'Bout half a mile," was the ready response.

"Can you direct me to his place?"

"Guess I kin. Turn to yer left 'round the tavern, an' foller yer nose. When yeh come to a white house with big, new yaller barns back of it, that's Steve's."

"Steve ain't to home," put in Bannister, anxious for another chance, "but we're expectin' of him ev'ry minnit. He's sure to stop here fer his mail, so if you want——"

"Never mind!" the stranger interrupted shortly, and, throwing another hasty glance around, he marched out of the room with the same short, decided step that had so marked his coming.

"Who do you think that feller was, Mr. Selton?" Poole asked, as soon as the man was out of hearing.

Selton thought for a moment without replying, then he said slowly:

"I am sure I don't know. I wish I did. That he is an enemy of Larkin's, I am certain. He could

not have explained that fact to better advantage, had he said so in so many words. To me, he had every appearance of an escaped convict, and I think he is. At least, had I been placed as some of you men were, I should not have been so anxious to give him information."

A silence fell upon the company, all of whom had more than once been witnesses of Selton's far-sightedness and sagacity. To the most of those there, his mere suspicions presented themselves as facts, and the thought that some of them had unwittingly wronged the generous and popular Larkin, hung heavily on their spirits.

Charles Barker, a cool, level-headed man, and so intimately associated with Selton as to be known as the latter's "right bower," was not so willing to accept everything for granted, and broke the silence by asking:

"Are you sure he was an escaped convict?"

"I did not say I was sure," was the response, "but there was every indication of it. If ever man had the prison lock-step, that man had it. His hair, too, had a prison crop, and his face a prison shave."

"All close-cropped, smooth-shaven men are not escaped convicts," suggested Barker.

"No, but all convicts are close-cropped, smooth-shaven men," was the quick response.

Barker was fond of hearing his friend dwell on such points of interest, and he returned to the charge:

"Did you observe anything else about the man that would warrant your thinking him a convict?" he asked.

"His was a healthy face, yet it had not a tinge of color, the effect of long, close confinement."

"Was that all?"

"Not quite. This is scarcely the time of year

when men have their hair cropped close to their heads, especially when their scalps are seared as this fellow's was. One long red scar was undoubtedly caused by a bullet. I have seen many convicts in my life, and can hardly be mistaken. Like men in other walks of life, they unconsciously form a class, the characteristics of which they all partake, to a greater or less degree."

"Maybe this one's time is out," suggested a voice.

"Possibly," Selton assented, "but I hardly think so. His shifty, uneasy eyes were not those of an honest man, while his quick, nervous starts, and his trick of throwing rapid, suspicious glances about, would indicate that he feared arrest, and looked upon every man as a possible pursuer."

"Mr. Selton," put in Bannister, "how'd y' know he had them scars on his scalp?"

"I saw them when he lifted his cap to scratch his head."

"So'd I," sighed Peter, eminently satisfied with even this small crumb of satisfaction.

When the laugh at Bannister's expense had subsided, Selton said, in a serious tone:

"Friends, I may be foolish, but I can't help thinking that this man means mischief to our friend Larkin, perhaps to his wife. As both Steve's men are at the junction awaiting the coming of the cattle, Mrs. Larkin and her women help must be alone. If this fellow does mean to make trouble for the family, he is as liable to begin his work at the farm as he is to waylay Steve on his way home. I propose that one or two of us go up to Steve's house to see that the women are not disturbed, the rest to stay here to give him warning."

Barker gave Ned Palmer a glance, and the two left the room together, old Bannister's parting advice being to the effect that "ef that tarnal crop-

headed galoot come a-nosin' around fer trouble," to "jes' hev Miss Larkin take a raise out of him with her new-fangled gun, when his hide wouldn't be good fer nothing but bottoms fer collanders."

After the departure of his friends, Selton was manifestly uneasy. It was growing late, and Larkin should soon put in an appearance. The sitters at the store sympathized with his mood, watching him silently with anxious glances, on his frequent trips to the door, where he strained his eyes into the black night and listened intently for the hoofbeats of a coming horse. At last his vigilance seemed rewarded. He turned from the door, which he left ajar, coming toward his companions, with the clouds disappearing from his face.

"Steve just rode under the shed," he announced. "He'll be in, in a moment."

Scarcely had the words left his lips, when there came to the ears of the watchers the sound of men's voices in angry altercation. Then a pistol shot rang out, followed a moment after by a shriek of "Murder! Murder! Murder!"

Selton caught up a lighted lantern and, followed by everyone in the building, ran to the shed.

Steve Larkin was there, a handsome, stalwart figure, holding by the bridle a shying horse, and on the ground, writhing in the agony of a violent death, was the stranger who had called at the store an hour before. One sleeve of Larkin's coat was stained with blood, and horror was depicted on his pale face and in his wide, dry eyes.

"He killed me!" the stranger gasped. "Steve Larkin killed me, curse him! He stabbed me in the back! I'll——" but a torrent of blood rushing through his lips choked his utterance. There was a convulsive shudder, and the light went forever out of the cruel eyes.

All the simple country folk assembled there had seen death, but not in this awful form, and they stood in silence, not knowing what to say or how to act. A leader was necessary, and Selton, toward whom all eyes were directed, assumed the place. He threw the rays from his lantern over and about the corpse, and then lifted it so that the light shone directly into Larkin's face.

"This is bad business, Stephen," he said, in his deep, grave voice.

Larkin started slightly, and a short, dry laugh came from his lips.

"There's no doubt of that, Mr. Selton," he said. "Bad enough for everybody, especially him," indicating the dead man with a nod, "who came here on purpose to put another where he is now."

"Then you knew him?" queried Selton.

"Knew him!" cried Larkin, the blood rushing back into his face. "Knew him! I knew him only too well! Why, friends and neighbors, the last I knew of that man, he was in state prison, where he ought to have been now! He came here on purpose to kill me and——"

"And you killed him, instead," put in Selton, dryly.

Larkin's eyes dilated with horror as they met the steady gaze of his accuser, and he staggered back against his horse, as if completely overcome.

"Mr. Selton!" he cried, "I know it looks like that, but I——"

"I would withhold all statements for the grand jury or the courts," advised Selton, soothingly, and Larkin closed his lips.

Meanwhile the crowd had in some measure recovered from its first surprise, and others began to bestir themselves. Darting into a shadowy corner, Hank Stevens made a dash for the ground, and held something up to the light.

"Here's the revolver!" he cried. And another man, stooping over the corpse, sprang back in affright, yelling:

"Why, there's a knife half's long's my arm stickin' in his back!"

Then there came the rapid thud of galloping hoofs and a woman, clad in a white gown—young, beautiful, her long fair hair flying in the wind—rode into the circle of light, and, flinging herself from her horse's bare back, flew to where Larkin was standing and clasped her arms about his neck.

"Steve," she sobbed, "what has happened? Richards has come! He is here somewhere now!"

Then, noting the expression on Larkin's face, she loosened her hold and stepped back, crying:

"O, Steve, you have seen him and he has hurt you, dear—for there is blood on your sleeve. Where is he? Oh, where is he?"

She had been gazing into her husband's eyes, and hers followed them, when they fell upon the dead man.

"Harvey Richards! And—dead!" she gasped, instinctively stepping away from the corpse. "How did this happen?" turning to Selton.

"Ask your husband, madam," was the stern response.

She turned again to Larkin, her woman's soul in her eyes, while she made the simple query, "Did you kill him, Steve?"

And Larkin, his face for the moment almost transfigured, raised his right hand and solemnly said, "No, Helen, as God is my judge, I did not kill Harvey Richards."

Then her arms went once more round his neck, while the blood on his sleeve stained her white garment.

"I know you did not," she murmured, "because you say so."

* * * * *

When old Bannister had said that John Larkin was a strict religionist and a hard worker, he had touched upon the two leading traits of the man's character. Not only was he a Calvinist of the most pronounced type, but a gloomy, narrow-minded bigot as well. Of his own righteousness he had not a doubt. He was born to the kingdom. But he had strong doubts of the calling of the other men, and constantly enjoined them to strict living. He was opinionated and obstinate, which qualities he was pleased to group under the head of firmness. If a man agreed with him, the man's opinions were right; if he disagreed, there was no other way for it—the man was wrong.

In his own opinion he was a just man, severely so. Other men often doubted the first, but they were sure of his severity. He claimed to have not a thought, or to perform not an act, the authority for which he could not find in holy writ, and he had ready, on all occasions, an apt quotation from the same source, which he considered applicable to the subject at hand.

Hard work was a mania with John Larkin, and according to his own standard, he divided mankind into two classes—the industrious few and the idle many. There was but one sort of industry, however—that of hard manual labor. The professional and mercantile classes were tolerated as necessary evils, but their manner of obtaining a livelihood was looked upon as little better than downright robbery.

"Plow deep while sluggards sleep," was a favorite maxim with John Larkin, and he literally lived up to the letter of the sentiment. For, during the fall plowing season, it was his daily custom to rise

before light, rouse every one in the house, eat his breakfast by candlelight, and then wait for enough daylight to come that he might see the furrow. All farmers who did not follow this practice were sure to become targets for Mr. Larkin's shafts of bitter sarcasm, tipped, as they were, with the venom of contempt.

He cared but little for books or book-learning, his main interest in the schools being to assist in electing the stingiest man in the district to the office of trustee, so that taxes might be kept down through the medium of cheap teachers, short terms and little or no repairing. One weekly paper came into his home. It was necessary to have that, that he might keep the run of the courts and the proceedings of the board of supervisors, thus finding ample food for his grumbling and sighing propensities over the sinful waste of the taxpayers' money, real or fancied, by the town or county officials. The term "officeholder" was ever synonymous with "thief" and "rascal." He himself did not vote, professedly because the word "God" had been left out of the constitution. But no man was quicker to avail himself of the protection of the law, should occasion allow it, than this man who so thoroughly despised the source whence it came.

It is needless to relate that Larkin had a reputation for close living and parsimony, neither need remark be made on the apparent fact that he was overbearing and tyrannical, especially so toward those over whom he exercised control. Meek, obedient Agnes Jackson had merely bowed to her father's superior will, when she became Larkin's wife, thus transferring herself from one master to another.

Unto this couple one child was born, a son, and John Larkin, wholly disregarding any opinion the mother might have on the subject, proclaimed in his

loud, dictatorial voice, "His name shall be Stephen, for Stephen was the first martyr, and this is my first son. May he grow up to prove himself one of the elect, and may he be ever just as ready to suffer for his opinions as was his namesake!"

Despite the loftily pious graspings of his father's mind, the young Stephen grew into an ordinary boy, very much like other boys. He passed the period of long dresses, and of short dresses, and from the latter directly into trousers—for his father avowed that knickerbockers were vanity, and an abomination in the sight of the Lord. That the outlandish garments fashioned from his own and the hired men's half-worn clothing were an abomination to the boy never entered his calculation, and when the high-spirited lad chafed under the rule that made him a laughing stock among the boys of his age, he was sternly rebuked.

"Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall," his father quoted solemnly. "When I was of your age I didn't have half as good."

Meagre indeed was the schooling the boy received, for, although he loved learning and his active mind readily received instruction, there was always something to do at home, and Larkin was one of those who professed to believe that too much book learning is not good for a boy, and that next to no education at all is good enough for a girl. Farmers' sons were born to dig in the dirt, save money, and ultimately get to heaven, while farmers' daughters were predestined to a life of drugery in the homes of their fathers, from which, at a suitable age, they were transferred to the remainder of a life of drudgery in the homes of their husbands, with a chance of an eternity of bliss when toil was over, if—they chanced to be of the elect.

That his son early developed a manliness and an independent spirit wholly foreign to his own make-up did not long escape Larkin's observation, and he immediately set himself about breaking what he termed "this wicked temper."

"So long as you're under my roof," he would say, "you've no right to any opinions of your own. If you are positively sure that I'm wrong, you've no right to tell me so. And then, if the lad was persistent, or a hasty word escaped him, a brutal beating was sure to follow, often rendered the more humiliating by being administered in the presence of hired men or neighbors. On such occasions the mother dared not interfere, but when the boy, sullen and dejected, crept upstairs to his bed, the poor, broken-spirited creature would come and lay her hand on his brow, sobbing in dumb misery, until, with sudden impulse, he would throw his arms about her neck, and, drawing her head down, would kiss and caress her, while he told her of the happy home he meant to make for her when he became a man.

So, for his mother's sake, young Stephen remained at home. After his twelfth year he filled a man's place on the farm, working early and late, without other compensation than board and clothing; without the usual pleasures and recreations of boyhood, except when taken after work hours and during stormy days, when there was positively nothing to do. His was a restless and active mind, and he was proud and ambitious. Bereft of the means to buy books, he borrowed such as he could, and many a tallow dip borrowed from the candle box in the cellar burned itself away while he lay in bed, devouring until far into the night tales of adventure, travel and biography. These were not always the best works of their kind, but they were the best he could get—they gave him something to think about during his

hours of toil, and they fired his ambition to some day rise above his present condition and shine in the world of adventure.

When in his fifteenth year something new came into young Larkin's life. It was a raw, chilly May day, and Larkin senior came in dripping wet from the falling rain.

"There's a poor, mis'able little gray colt out in the pasture along with old Fan," he said, "not much bigger'n a dog. Likely it's dead 'fore this time. If it ain't I ought to go and knock it in the head."

"Don't you think you could fetch it 'round by gittin' it to the barn and feedin' it something warm," his wife ventured timidly.

"'Tain't wuth while," her husband growled. "It's chilled clean through now, and it ain't wuth while to try."

"O, father," the boy cried out, eagerly, "can't I have it? Won't you give it to me?"

Larkin hesitated long enough to remember that he had nothing at that moment for the boy to do, and gave an indifferent answer.

"I don't care," he said, "I wish you joy of the poor, meechin' little critter."

Steve hitched a horse to a stoneboat and brought the little half-dead animal to the barn, where he worked over it night and day until he had nursed it into healthy life.

Three years passed away—years of hard, unrequited toil for the boy, during which he grew into a tall, broad-shouldered young man, active, honest and full of courage. He was the idol of his mother, the slave of his father, and admired and liked by all who knew him. The gray colt, too, grew and thrived into a beautiful horse, intelligent and docile, yet spirited and full of speed.

As many hours as could be spared from his la-

bor, young Larkin devoted to breaking his colt, teaching him to perform clever tricks and rubbing and polishing his bright coat until it shone like silver. Many a summer night, when his father was fast asleep, the boy stole from his bed in the woodshed loft, and, leading the colt from the stable to the highway, leaped upon his bare back and went careering over the country roads for hours at a time. Always a lover of horses and a skillful reinsman from childhood, he thus became the most expert and daring rider for miles around, imitating, in his lonely play, all the difficult feats of horsemanship of which he had read and heard.

At this time an offer of a \$50 purse in a running race was made by the county fair association, and, unknown to his father, Steve entered "Gray Don." It was no easy matter to escape from labor, even for one day, but Larkin, who wanted to attend the fair himself, could scarcely withhold his consent, and actually stood by the racetrack with something like triumph on his stern face and saw the gray win three straight heats and the race. Neither did he forget, a few days later, to call upon the treasurer of the society and demand, in the name of his son, the \$50 purse.

After the race was over, Peter Pembroke, a well-known sporting man, sought out Steve and offered him a handsome price for the colt, but all to no purpose. The boy indignantly refused to put a price on his pet, saying curtly that the colt was not for sale.

Some time previous, a relative of the Larkins had died and left \$200 in cash to young Stephen. About a week after his triumph at the races, the lad drew a load of wood to Fulda, the county seat. While passing the office of his deceased relative's executor, the latter called him in and paid him the full amount of

his legacy, bidding him carry it home and have his father care for it for him.

Steve rode home in the dusk, thinking many thoughts. If there is anything that every country boy desires, it is the possession of a fine horse, harness and top buggy, and young Larkin was no exception to the rule. He had the first, and it had been his dream, when he should come into his money, to induce his father to allow him to become the owner of a harness and wagon. He had very grave doubts of his ability to bring his father to his way of thinking, but hope was strong in his breast. He was no longer a child, he argued. He worked hard and had little, and surely, some consideration was due him!

It was after dark when he reached home, but he needed no light to stable his team, after which duty he opened the box stall, where his pet was kept, to say, "Good evening" to Don.

To his surprise he found the stall empty. He hurried to the house, a vague uneasiness tugging at his heart. "Where's Don?" he cried, as he burst into the kitchen.

John Larkin looked up from the Bible he was reading, and met his son's gaze uneasily. "I've sold him to Pete Pembroke," he declared in his loud, defiant voice.

The boy staggered back against the wall, his face white with grief and anger.

"What right had you to sell my horse?" he demanded.

"Your horse!" Larkin sneered. "Your horse! When'd you git to be a horse owner? You've called him your'n all along, but what's your'n's mine, I guess. And I've kept a plaything fur you long enough. Have you anything more to say about it?"

"Yes, I have!" Steve shouted, his cheeks flaming and his eyes fairly blazing. "I don't care whether

you're my father or not! I've always done what I was able to do here, and got nothin' for it. You give me the colt because you thought it was going to die, and now when he's worth something, you take him away from me! I know better than to ask you for the money he fetched! I wouldn't touch it if you offered it to me! I only want Don, and you have stole him from me! You ain't any better than any other horse thief, even if you do belong to the elect!"

A horsewhip of the sort commonly known as a "blacksnake" stood conveniently by, and this Larkin seized and came at his son.

The whiplash whistled through the air, but it never descended, for Steve sprang upon his father like an enraged bloodhound, wrested the whip from his hand and flung him bodily into his chair by the stove, where he sat in stupid silence, too much amazed for utterance.

Steve turned to where his sobbing mother cowering in a corner. "Don't cry, mother," he pleaded. "This had to come some time, you know. It couldn't go on so always."

He stooped and kissed her tenderly, and continued in a choked voice. "Good-by, mother. I'm goin' away now, but I'll come back to you some time."

Larkin aroused himself from his stupor and snarled out: "Oh, you're goin' away, be you? Well, it's good riddance, son of Belial. 'Twon't be very long before you'll come crawlin' back fur a square meal. But remember this, I'll have none o' this prodigal son business around me, so when you come back, you needn't expect me to put a ring on yer finger er shoes on yer feet. But you ain't gone yit!"

For an hour, the parents heard the tramp of their son's feet as he walked about making his preparations. The mother sobbed quietly while she laid the cloth for the evening meal. The father sat, with a

stern frown on his brow, silently reading his Bible. Then, when they heard the front door open and close, the poor woman burst forth in loud lamentations, but John Larkin only sneered bitterly.

"Let him go!" he said. "He'll be back in less'n a week. He'll find out by that time that he ain't boss here."

That night, when the midnight express, west-bound, pulled into the station at Fulda, a tall young man, in an ill-fitting suit, and carrying a bundle in his hand, stepped from the shadow of the depot and swung himself onto the rear platform. It was young Stephen Larkin, and he had really left home.

CHAPTER II.

It was a smoking car into which young Larkin walked, on the night of his going away. His experience in railway travelling was limited, and now he found himself speeding through the night on a journey he knew not whither. A sense of his loneliness and his insignificance in the great world came over him, and it was with a step hesitating and almost timid that he walked down the aisle between the rows of seats where, coiled up in various attitudes of discomfort, men were sleeping, or trying to sleep.

Some smokers were sitting up, wide awake, and behind two of these Steve found a vacant seat. He had eaten nothing since breakfast and was hungry and dispirited. Not that he regretted the step he had taken. He felt keenly the indignities that had been heaped upon him since childhood, culminating with the crowning outrage of selling his horse, and his bold, self-reliant spirit was up in arms, ready for anything the future might hold in store.

"Ticket!" said the conductor, touching his arm.

Steve had taken a \$10 bill from the roll in his pocket, and this he tendered to the conductor. "I want to go to Buffalo," he said. The official made change and was about to pass on, when the boy spoke again. "Can I get anything to eat on this train?" he asked.

"Guess not," was response. "You'll have to wait till we get to Buffalo."

A large man wearing a full beard of reddish hue

and having a broad-brimmed felt hat set jauntily on the back of his head was occupying the opposite seat. This man had listened to the conversation between Steve and the conductor, and now, removing a great meerschaum pipe from between his lips, leaned toward the boy and said:

"Hungry, sonny?"

Steve nodded, and the other went on: "If you ain't goin' to get nothin' till the train reaches Buffalo, you'll feel longer'n a modoc's horn. I've got a snack o' grub in my grip here, and if you'll have it, I'll give it to you."

"You are very kind——" Steve began.

"I ain't, neither," the man interrupted "Tain't kindness to give away what you don't want. I've had grub enough to satisfy a Sioux after a buffler hunt, here!" and he jabbed his hand into his valise, bringing it forth laden with a fine ham sandwich, which he held across the aisle to the boy.

"Take it, sonny," he said, in his rough, good-natured voice. "Take it! It'll do you good."

Steve accepted the proffered food thankfully and ate it with a relish, while the big man sank back into his seat and began puffing at his pipe.

The two men in the seat in front of young Larkin were still sitting up smoking, with their heads close together, talking in low, earnest tones. To his ears came the hum of their voices mingled with the monotonous roar and clatter of the fast-moving train. The man in the opposite seat began to nod, his head falling forward on his breast, from which attitude he was constantly recovering with a jerk that threatened to dislocate his neck. At length he became so far lost that he nearly fell from his seat, recovering his balance with so violent an effort that he became wide awake. "Laffin at me?" he demanded, as he caught Steve's smiling eyes.

"Pretty near. You did look kind o' funny, 'most breakin' your neck there."

The big man laughed. "I s'pose I did." he chuckled. "I'm an amusin' old maverick, I reckon. I don't want to go to sleep, and I hadn't ought to, neither. But cavoortin' about in stock yards and on cars, is somethin' I ain't ust to, and I'm gettin' mighty tired and wore out. I don't s'pose there's any danger nappin' off a little, anyhow, so here goes."

The ranchman, for such he seemed to be, lifted his valise from the floor to the seat beside him, and, removing his wide hat, reclined against a great gray overcoat in the corner, whence soon came various puffs and snorts, finally settling down to a long, loud, peaceful snore. Steve watched him curiously, perhaps for want of something better to do, and suddenly became aware that the two men in the seat ahead were similarly occupied. Their conversation had relapsed into almost a whisper, but from their gestures and glances, he was almost certain they were talking of the sleeping man.

He was vaguely uneasy. The man must have had some reason for saying that he ought not to sleep, and then, too, he had spoken of the absence of danger—as if there could be any danger in the simple act of sleeping in a loaded passenger coach. Somehow, Steve thought, if there was any danger, the key to the same lay in the valise, the handle of which was tightly gripped by the muscular fingers of the sleeper. The man had been kind to him, and he determined that if, by remaining awake, he might help to ward off the danger, real or fancied, he would be only repaying his friend in kind. Alas for human resolves! The boy was young and healthy, and moreover, he was tired, and after an hour of the seemingly senseless vigil during which nothing happened,

he, too, lulled by the caseless click-clack of the car wheels, fell off into slumber.

The voice of a trainman calling the name of a station awoke the young sleeper, who for a moment imagined it his father's stern call to get up. He opened his eyes for an instant. His friend across the aisle still slept. Neither could he discover any wide-awake persons in the car, save the two in front, and they were talking—talking. The train was still moving, but its noise was so much diminished that Steve caught a few words. In an instant he was on the alert, lying back with closed eyes, drawing long, regular breaths, but with ears strained to catch every word.

"He sleeps well," said one of the men, throwing a glance toward the figure nestled against the gray coat.

"Ought to," said the other. "Ain't had his clo'es off in three nights."

"Hadn't we better make a break for the swag right here, 'stead of waitin' till we get to Buffalo?"

"Naw! Town's too small. Have us nabbed 'fore we could stow it."

"Sure he's got it in that grip?"

"Sure! Seen the oilskin cover when he opened it, to give the kid that sandwich. Everything's all O. K. We'll be runnin' in jus' 'fore daylight, an' then's the time. You give him the sponge an' I'll collar the boodle. Wonder if there's any place open here where we kin git a drink."

"Shouldn't wonder. Nothin' like tryin'."

The train came to a full stop, and the two men left the car.

In an instant Steve was across the aisle, shaking the sleeping ranchman. "Wake up," he said, in a low tone. "Wake up! I've something to tell you."

A sonorous snore broke off midway and the man

sat up, fully awake, his left hand tightening on the handle of his grip, his right moving with a quick gesture toward his hip pocket. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye, but his voice was quiet enough when he said: "You've got something to tell me, sonny? Well, let 'er go."

"Have you got any—any 'swag' in your grip?" he stammered.

For an instant the stranger's keen eyes were fixed on the boy's eager face, then he gave a short laugh. "If you was a man," he said, "I'd probably give you some picturesque western language for stickin' your horn into my biz'ness. But as yer nothin' but a boy, I'll let you down easy. What is it to you, anyhow?"

"It's nothing to me," Steve answered, speaking in low, rapid tones, "but I overheard them two men who was settin' in front of me lay a plan to sponge you, whatever that might be, collar your satchel, with the swag in it, just as the train is slowin' up fur Buffalo, and jump off."

The big man grew interested. "How'd they know I had the swag in my grip?" he demanded.

"One of the fellers said he seen it, wrapped up in a piece of oilskin, when you opened your grip to give me that sandwich."

The suspicious look on the man's face gave way to one of frank admiration. "Young man," he said, "you're a thoroughbred. Where's them two measly modocs now?"

"Gone to git a drink. They're likely to come back any minute."

"All right. Now we'll arrange an entertainment fur them fellers. Here, mister," hailing the conductor from the end of the car, "come here. Is there another stop before we git to Buffalo?"

"Yes, sir," he said. "Just one. Why?"

"Oh, nothin', only when you git there, just tele-

graft ahead and have two policemen waitin' in the Buffalo deepo', that's all."

The conductor hesitated.

"What use have you for poucemen?" he asked.

For answer the big man drew forth a morocco case from which he took an official looking paper.

"P'haps this will help answer yer question," he smiled, holding the document so that the man in blue could read.

The conductor became at once attentive and respectful.

"All right, Mr. Kent," he said, "I will attend to the matter," and he moved off.

The big man turned to Steve.

"I am old Guy Kent of Cotton Run Ranch, Montana," he said. "As we're likely to be pardners in the comin' circus, I'd like to know your handle."

"My name is Stephen Larkin."

"All right—Steve, fur short. Kin you shoot, Steve?"

"A little."

"Good. Now, I've got an extra gun here, which you jest tuck in yer pocket where it'll be handy. When we git runnin' into Buffalo, I be makin' b'lieve sleep like a house afire. When that 'r' galoot sticks his sponge under my nose, I'll wake up, suddint, an' the circus'll begin. Fur fear of accidents in the program, you jest poke this gun up under their off ear, will yeh?" and he handed Steve a handsome revolver.

"Yes, sir."

Kent consulted his watch. "Train stops here thirty minutes, an' time's up," he said, "Let's git to poundin' our ear."

Nearly every man in the smoker was sound asleep, and the conversation, carried on in low, cautious tones, had attracted no attention. Scarcely had Kent

nestled down against the gray coat, and young Larkin composed himself in his corner, when the train began to move, and the two men came back to their seat, bringing a rank smell of liquor. Apparently their plans were now all arranged, for they talked no more, but fixing themselves in comfortable positions, seemed to be sleeping.

From beneath his low-drawn cap, Steve looked across the aisle at Kent. What a consummate actor the man was! He lay there, the perfect semblance of restful repose, his broad chest rising and falling with long, peaceful respirations, while from his half-open mouth came the regular cadence of a terrific snore.

The train made another stop. One or two passengers came in, but none left the car, the new arrivals immediately composing themselves to sleep. The young watcher thought of the conductor telegraphing ahead for officers. They would be in waiting, undoubtedly, but what might not happen before they appeared? His heart was beating painfully, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from leaping to his feet and tramping up and down the aisle. He threw frequent glances at the men ahead. They had turned a seat, and one of them was riding with his face toward Kent. From beneath his drooping lids Steve could perceive the gleam of the man's eyeballs—cold, cruel, designing, watching the intended victim with a vigilance that knew no rest.

The train sped on. A trainman put his head in at the door and droned out, "Buf'lo nex' st'n, all change!" Then all was still again except for the sound of snoring and the buzz and roar of the train. An hour passed with no change, and lights began to gleam at intervals along the track. Then came a long whistle from the engine, and the train

began to slacken speed. Steve glanced at the men in front. They were standing now, and one of them was saturating a sponge with the contents of a small bottle. He looked across the aisle, where Guy Kent seemingly slumbered, and, dropping his hand into his pocket, gripped the handle of the revolver. The supreme moment had come!

Like serpents the two men glided across the aisle and stopped beside their victim, while behind them, unperceived, the tall boy stood waiting for the test. The younger of the two, a slender, well-set-up fellow with a black beard and mustache, bent over Kent, while his companion, an older and heavier man, laid his hand on the handle of the valise to which the fingers of the sleeper still clung.

Something happened then. Scarcely had the chloroform-laden sponge touched the victim's nose, when he sprang into a sitting position, and his assailant found himself gazing into the muzzle of a revolver. "Make one move," said Kent, quietly, "and I'll pump you full of lead."

For a moment, a striking tableau was enacted there—striking, yet with no witnesses save the participants, for the men in the car all still slept. The train was now running slowly, and time (for the robbers) becoming short. Suddenly the older man wrenched the valise from its owner's grasp and turned to flee, only to find a tall, countrified-looking boy levelling a wicked-looking self-cocker at his head.

"Don't stir——" the boy began. But his speech was there interrupted by a pistol shot, and the young robber's right arm fell useless to his side, the pistol he had attempted to draw during the temporary diversion caused by his companion, falling with a clatter to the floor.

"Told you so," cried Kent, pleasantly. "Hated to spile that good right arm o' your'n, but you hadn't

ought to moved. Reckon you ain't acquainted with old Guy Kent, er you wouldn't have b'en caught monkeyin' with him. Don't let that feller git away from you, Steve. We kin use him in our business."

"He ain't goin' to git," remarked Steve laconically.

Everybody was wide awake now, and men came hurrying to look upon the unusual spectacle. Among others came the conductor. "What's up here?" he demanded.

"Ain't anything up yet," returned the cool voice of Kent, "but somethin'll be up, and all up, if he don't keep on a-dancin' to my music. Be you onto yer job, Steve?"

"You bet," was the response.

"Now, gentlemen," the ranchman continued, never for an instant removing his eye from his pistol barrel, "you all see this blummy who's investigatin' the business end of my gun? Well, him an' the onsavory coyote who's so dead in love with my young friend Larkin there, got it into their durned heads that they wanted my satchel—come pretty near git-tin' it, too, as you'll observe by lookin' in t'other ring of this circus. Fearin' they might not succeed with their nefaryous design, this thoughtful young seryphin held a sponge soaked in chloryform under my horn with the result as you see, 'ceptin' that I het to wing him when he got kind o' obstopulous. Air we most to the depoo', conductor?"

"There now," was the answer, as the cars came to a stop.

"Wa-al, send in them policemen. The first act of this circus is over."

The entrance of two stalwart policemen soon relieved Kent and young Larkin of their prisoners, who had maintained a stubborn silence all along.

"Meet you at court at 10 o'clock," sang out Kent,

gayly. "That'll be the end of the circus, so far's we're concerned, but you'll be apt to stay in the business some time yet. So long!"

Steve breakfasted with Mr. Kent that morning, and with him appeared at court against the would-be robbers. In court the ranchman recognized the younger man as one he had seen about the stockyards in New York, where he had sold his cattle and received his pay in cash, which he had then and there wrapped in oilskin and put into his satchel. A conviction was easily secured, the prisoners receiving from the judge some good advice and a year each in the penitentiary at hard labor.

Walking toward the depot, Kent turned to young Larkin. "Where are you goin', Steve?" he asked.

The boy confessed that he did not know.

"Think you'd like to be a cowpuncher?" was the next question.

"Do you mean a cowboy?" Steve asked.

"That's about the size of it. You've done me a mighty good turn and I like you first rate. If you think you'd like to live on the range, I'll give you a job and use you pretty white. What d'ye say?"

As a result of this conversation, Mr. Kent bought two tickets, and the boy who had been only the day before seemingly tied down to life on a rocky side-hill farm in York state, now found himself seated in the cars beside his new employer, flying toward a strange new life on the plains of the great west.

CHAPTER III.

Soon after entering the cars, Steve's sleepless night began to tell upon him. Like most men similarly circumstanced, the excitement of the past twenty-four hours had given to him a season of unusual physical and mental activity, and now, when it was over, nature reasserted her claims and he had more than once nearly fallen off his seat, when Guy Kent, sitting in front of him puffing his big meerschauum, observed, "Better curl up and snooze a while, my boy. You watched me while I slept las' night, now I'll watch you while you sleep to-day."

Steve needed nothing but the suggestion, and for three hours he slept, with Kent's great coat for a pillow. When he awoke, the grizzled ranchman still sat calmly smoking his everlasting pipe. The train was running along the shores of a great sheet of water, and here and there appeared the white sails of passing ships. A misty blue line marked the horizon, along which a steamboat, tugging a tow of barges, was faintly discernable.

"Lake Erie," grunted Kent, following Steve's eyes with an expressive gesture. "Ever see it before?"

"No. I've never be'n anywheres before," the boy answered.

"How'd you come to be goin' some'ers now?" was the next query.

The questioning brought a flush to the young face, but its owner met Kent's eyes without flinching. "Be-

cause you hired me to go, I s'pose," was the evasive answer.

Kent laughed drily and betrayed his Yankee origin. "I reckon I didn't hire you to git onto the cars at that little station las' night," he said. "Young feller, I guess you're runnin' away from home, hain't yeh?"

Again Steve raised his eyes to the keen gray ones that gazed so steadily into his own. Shrewd eyes they were indeed, but for all that they were kind and true, and the boy felt that here was a man to be trusted. "No!" he answered firmly. "I ain't runnin' away. I've done nothin' to run away for. I'm only goin' away."

"Sure!" was Kent's hearty rejoinder. "I know you ain't runnin' now, leastways. But you're goin' away, jes' as you say, and at a pretty lively gait, too," glancing from the window at the landscape flying by. "Maybe you had good reason fur not stayin' to home, maybe you didn't. That you know and I don't. But as you talk of stoppin' with me for awhile, I reckon I'd ought to know something about you. I ain't got any boys of my own, but I've got—"

He checked himself for an instant and then began again: "As I was sayin', I've got some ideas of right and wrong, which is pretty much the same in Montana as it is in York state. Better give me both sides of the story. I'm a middlin' good judge of the truth."

Thus encouraged, Steve gave his employer a truthful account of his life and his difficulties with his father, culminating as they did with the sale of the colt. Kent listened intently, saying not a word until the recital was finished.

"Funny, ain't it," he broke out, "that your experience and mine have been about along the same line? It's funny, too, that some fathers don't appear to have no more sense than a stray calf. I was born on

a sidehill farm back yender in old Vermont, and I guess my dad had about as little sense as any of 'em. Very partic'lar, pious kind of a man, he was, too—goin' to church about ev'ry Sunday and spendin' the rest of the day makin' us fellers set around on wooden-bottomed chairs while he held forth on the terrors of hell fire and the jedgment day, and in makin' us know how wicked we was and how certain we was of bein' among the damned."

He stopped in his talk long enough to fill and light his pipe, and then with a little chuckle continued: "Yes, pap was a mighty good man, but he had a great eye to the main chance, and he ra'ly felt hurt one time when I was about eighteen years old. It rained one Saturday night in hayin' time and wet a field of nice timothy hay we had up in cock. So next mornin', 'fore he went to church, he set me and the hired man shakin' it out, claimin' that it was more sin fur the hay to git colored than it was to save it on Sunday. He was powerful cut up 'cause the hired man quit the next day, and powerful hurt 'cause he blabbed it all over the neighborhood."

Boy-like, Steve asked a pointed question. "Did you leave home, too?" he said.

Kent's eyes twinkled shrewdly. "Ruther," he answered. "I'd 'a' be'n back there in Vermont yet, if I hadn't."

The boy flushed and became unwittingly eloquent. "Oh, I didn't mean that," he hastened to explain. "I was only wonderin' if other boys' fathers was all like mine. I've wondered if there ever was boys who could do enough work to please their fathers. That seemed to be about all he ever cared for me. I have often laid awake nights and thought how much I could love and respect him if he had used me—I don't know how—different. Anyway, just the same as he used other folks, you know."

"There's one of the places where men show their lack of sense," said Kent. "They seem to forgit that boys is human and entitled to respect, even if they are only boys. Was there ever a boy whose father was satisfied with the work his boys done? Wa'al, I s'pose there was some sich, but my father never was gaited that way, no more than your'n. Hed a great faculty, pap did, of drawin' comparisons—always makin' it appear that his own boys was a good deal meaner, a heap wickeder and a hull lot lazier than other boys.

"They used to be a couple boys lived nex' farm to us, and them fellers was our pet 'bomination. Little, round-shouldered, thin-chested fellers they was, always makin' yeh think of a titman pig picked 'fore it was ripe. Wa'al, them Ackley boys was what lots of folks likes to call 'smart.' They could hold a plow jes' as soon's they could reach up and git holt of the handles, and in the fall of the year when it was short days, they ust to git up 'bout haf' pas' three feed their teams, git their breakfast, and git in the field soon's as they could see the furrow. Pap ust to p'int to 'em and say: 'Jes' look at them Ackley boys. There they air, out an' at it, while my lazy critters ain't hed their grub yet. If I hed boys like them I'd git right along. Or, Sundays after church he'd say to mother: 'Did yeh see how still them Ackley boys kep' in church? And how well they knowed their Sabbath school lessons? I ketched you, Mister Guy, a-laffin' 'cause Aunt Becky Staples come out one word behind when they finished singin' the psalm. And you, Mister Richard, if I ever ketch you again kickin' Thomas Ackley, comin' down the stairs, I'll lamm you if you're bigger'n a tree. Oh, why ain't I got boys like them Ackleys.'

"The Ackleys ust to git their hands hard with

workin', and sometimes in cold weather they'd crack open and git all sore. Then they'd come over to our house and show their wounds with consider'ble pride, and Pap would groan in anguish 'cause we didn't have such honor'ble scars, and would do all he could to make us feel how lazy and no 'count we was. If the Ackleys and us each had twenty-five cents given to us fur th' Fo'th of July, them fellers always come over to our house next day to brag how they hed each saved thirteen cents out of their two shillin'. Then of course th' superior economy of the Ackleys was held to us, and our lives was made miser'ble by comparison. Maybe me and Dick didn't hate them fellers! Why, we often ust to lay awake nights hatchin' plans to do 'em bodily harm, and onc't when they went and ketched th' eetch, we actually begrudged 'em the fun they seemed to have scratchin' of themselves."

"What kind o' men did they make?" Steve asked.

Kent removed his pipe from his mouth and regarded his companion with something akin to pity. "Men!" he broke out. "Why, they didn't make no men 'tall! Kind o' growed up same's other boys, leastwise in body, but too plagued good and smart to be real men. Built theirselves a little idol out o' gold and silver, wrapped a greenback 'round it, and then started in to worship it; sot it in between theirselves and other men so't they couldn't see nothin' ner nobody else. Oldish fellers, like me, they air now, and that pinched and dried up that they put yeh in mind of a dried herrin'. Never hed a bit of fun in their lives, had them Ackleys. Jes' put in ev'ry day of their existence grubbin' and diggin' in the dirt, all the time furgittin' that dead bees don't need no more honey. Why, they ust to say that Enick Ackley wus so all-fired stingy that he always

ondressed himself 'fore settin' down, fur fear he'd wear out the seat of his pants."

How long this dissertation on the subject of Kent's boyhood might have lasted, Steve never knew. The train was running into Cleveland, and in the hurry and bustle of changing cars, the minds of both were diverted to other subjects.

When the train had left the beautiful city by the lake, and darkness had come, a trainman came through and lighted the lamps. Then Steve saw his companion's character in an entirely new light. They were riding, as usual, in the smoking car. Across the aisle were sitting two young men, evidently friends. In the seat behind them, and talking to them volubly, was a tall, loose-jointed, countrified looking fellow, who held in his hand a pack of playing cards, his high-pitched, nasal drawl being distinctly heard above the roar of the train.

"Yes, sir," he explained. "Dad sent me to Buf'lo 'ith a slammin' good pair o' hosses to sell, an' I sold 'em, you bet. Got \$500 fur 'em, cash down, an' I'd 'a hed it yit ef I hedn't b'en durn fool enough to blow in a hundred on a slick card game some fellers wus playin'."

"What was the game?" asked one of the young men, greatly interested.

"Goll darned 'fi know what they called it. They got my money all right enough, an's I dassent go home 'thout it all, I've l'arnt th' game an' I'm goin' to git it back outen some un else, so's to stan' pat 'ith th' ol' man."

He settled back in his seat and began to awkwardly shuffle his cards. He finally selected three, which he placed on the cushion beside him, returning the rest to his pocket.

"There!" he drawled, "they only used three cards to play the game, an' this is the way they done it."

Picking up his cards, he began manipulating them after the manner of "three card monte men" the world over. "There!" he said to his audience again, "you see thet they ain't but three on 'em. Now one of you fellers pick out a card thet you're sure you'd know again, and I'll kinder throw 'em round a little an' bet you you can't pick out yer card."

"Bet yeh I can," said one of the young men, confidently.

"All right, mister. Hev yeh got yer card picked out?"

"Yes."

"Wa-al now, I'll bet yeh jes' tew dollars thet yeh cain't find it agin."

The young man placed his bet promptly and won, to the embryo gambler's evident surprise. "How'd he do that?" he gasped across the aisle to Kent, who had become an interested spectator.

"Easy 'nuff," grunted the ranchman. "Ennybuddy kin do it."

Steve glanced at his companion and was surprised at the change that had apparently taken place in him. His neck was outstretched, his eyes shining and eager, his whole pose that of an innocent, credulous old rustic anxious to try conclusions with a stranger at his own game.

The stranger laughed with affected carelessness.

"Bet yeh ten yeh cain't pick it out," he said.

Kent fished a ten-dollar gold piece from his pocket and handed it to Steve. "Put up your dust, sonny," he simpered.

The stranger did so and called, "Got yer eye on yer card?"

"You bet."

The cards were manipulated with clumsy rapidity and laid face downward on the seat. "What card 'd yeh select, mister?" asked the player.

Kent arose and stepped across the aisle, "it was the ten of hearts," he said, as he lifted the middle card. "And as this is it, I'll thank you Stephen, fur them twenty dollars."

The man with the cards fairly bounded from his seat with well-simulated surprise.

"Waal, I'll be gol-darned," he drawled, "ef you fellers ain't a-beatin' me at my own game. Say, mister, yeh jes' happened to do that. I'll be yeh tew hundred dollars yeh cain't do it ag'in."

An easy chuckle came from the ranchman's huge beard: "No, you won't, sonny," he laughed, while his shrewd eyes twinkled. "The right time to quit bettin' is when yer ahead."

"Yeh don't mean to say yeh ain't a'goin' to try 't ag'in?"

"I do mean jest that," said Kent, in his deep, clear voice. "You three fellers," taking in the whole group with a sweeping glance, "seen me a-settin' over here, which you couldn't help. You said to yourselves, 'There's an old hayseed settin' over there (which was right). 'We'll git him interested' (which you did). 'We'll let him win ten dollars' (which yeh did). 'Then we'll pull his weasel fur a couple of hundred, which you didn't, fur old Guy Kent hes see lots of three-card monte men' afore yeh was born."

"Yeh dassent bet!" cried one of the gang.

The ranchman's eyes glittered, and there was an unmistakable menace in his voice when he said:

"I dast do a good many things. We'll be runnin' into a station pooty soon, and ef you fellers don't make yerselves sca'ce w'en we git there, I'll make things so hot fur yeh thet ye'll think yer place of future punishment is a summer holiday."

Ten minutes later, when the train came to a stop, three young men dropped from the smoker and disappeared into the darkness, and Guy Kent, smiling

quietly, placed his great coat under his head and slept well.

When Steve regained consciousness the next morning the train was flying over the prairies of northern Indiana. He gazed with languid interest at the wide stretches of corn lands awaiting the harvest, at the treetops just touched by the rising sun, at the groups of quiet cattle lying here and there awaiting the day, at the snug tree-embowered farm-houses where men were already beginning to stir about. It was later at home than here, he reasoned. Father and mother were astir, the latter had fed the clamoring poultry, and now she was preparing breakfast. Her eyes were full of unshed tears, and he knew by the sad expression on her tired, patient face that she was thinking of him. Father, by force of habit, would get the cows up and milk them first of all, then he would attend to a duty that heretofore had fallen to his son—he would feed the horses. In his mind's eye he watched his father move about the stable until he came to Don's empty stall, then his face changed. All his sweet, tender yearnings vanished, and he remembered only his father's injustice and his parting taunt, "He'll see," he murmured aloud, "if I'll sneak home fur a good square meal! I'll die first!"

"Don't die," drawled a deep, pleasant voice, and Steve colored deeply when he turned to look into Kent's smiling face.

"I know jest how you feel," observed the ranchman, "fur I've be'n thar. You don't stand no present chance of lackin' a good squar' meal. and I would not give a flip fur yeh ef yeh did lack one, ef yeh couldn't hustle round and git it. God hates a coward and I've noticed that them fellers that's always round lookin' fur misfortune and death pooty near always git accommodated. The best rule fur life

that I've ever found is what old Ben Franklin said: 'Live as if you would die to-morrow, work as if you would live a hundred years.' You've put yer hand to th' plow, and if I'm any jedge o' human natur you've got it in yeh to cut a good, long, clean furrah.' Jes' keep yer eye on yer gun and be stiddy, and ye'll hit the bull's-eye, sure. Then yeh kin go back to that mother you're so fond of some day, and she'll be proud of yeh."

How often in his later life did the sound advice of the old plainsman come back to Steve. Did there come a moment when he became despondent, or discouraged, he had but to say to himself, "Keep your eye on your gun, my boy. Stiddy now; keep your eye on your gun! You'll hit the bull's-eye yet."

By noon Chicago was reached and a walk through the celebrated "burnt district," then rapidly recovering from the great fire of 1871, filled the raw country youth with amazement. Dinner was followed by a visit to the stock yards, and there young Larkin first came to a realizing sense of the importance of the man he accompanied. Everybody connected with the vast institution seemed to know Guy Kent. Substantial looking business men drew him aside for consultation, sleek young clerks tipped their hats to him with a smile, and even the butchers stopped long enough in their work to bid "good day" to "Uncle Guy."

Once Kent stooped to make an inquiry, "Where's Molly?" he asked.

"She's moved since you were here," was the reply. "You'll find her round the corner there, back of 53."

Kent led the way to where a faded, patient-looking Irish woman was keeping a fruit stand.

"Howdy, Molly," was his abrupt greeting.

The woman rose and shook off a sturdy urchin

who was clinging to her skirts before giving a hearty hand to the ranchman. "May the saints preserve us, but it's Mither Kint," she cried, her face lighting up with genuine welcome. "An' it's a long time since we've seen yeh blissed face."

"Nonsense, Molly, nonsense! Don't put it on so all-fired thick. How's yerself and the babies makin' it?"

"Only middlin', yer anner. Sometimes purty porely, bad cess to th' cow that burnt up Shecargó. Oi'm livin' now, sense Oi was burnt out, in a shanty down be th' lake beyant."

Kent drew two ten-dollar bills from his pocket. "Here, Molly," he said, "is a ten-spot that I found last night, and here is another that I didn't find. Take 'em and git somethin' good fur th' babies."

He pressed the money into her hand and turned to go, followed by Molly's loudly expressed thanks; only calling back over his shoulder as he moved away, "Never mind, Molly, never mind. Good-by and good luck to yerself and the babies.—Husband ust to work in th' yards here," he explained to Steve, "Got killed onloadin' steers one day. I always like to remember her a little."

"He's a pretty good man to tie to," thought Steve.

That evening, while at the station, waiting for their train, a short, broad-shouldered man of perhaps fifty, and wearing on his firm, capable face a close-cropped gray beard, came to where they were sitting and greeted Kent with quiet warmth.

"Didn't know you was in th' city till jes' now," he said. "Thought mebbe I'd ketch yeh at th' dee-po'."

"Glad to see yeh, Sam," was Kent's hearty response. "Shake hands with my young friend Larkin, Mr. Lorimer. He's goin' to do some cow-punchin' fur me."

The introduction acknowledged, Kent continued, "Fetch in anything?" he asked.

"Yes, five car loads. Got 'em all sold out, but one car of heifers. How's th' York market?"

"Middlin,. I got paid fur goin'. Is everything level on the range?"

Lorimer's face clouded. "Ev'rybody's be'n well over to your place's, fur's I know," he responded, "and all my folks is takin' their rations as usual. Leastwise they wus when I come away. Alf Rogers rode over day 'fore I left to tell me that th' durned rustlers hev be'n at it ag'in. Run off 'bout fifty of his cattle th' week afore, and took some of Si Brady's, too. You remember Si's man, Pete O'Neill, th' one they called 'Dandy Pete?' Well, they found Pete out on th' range where he'd gone to look after a stray bunch, dead, with a hole in his hide, right over his heart. His han'some yaller watch an' chain, his money, that they knowed he had, his gun and his big di'mond ring was all gone. Whoever done it het to cut his finger off to git th' ring. Pete's horse and the hull bunch of cattle went at the same time."

Kent muttered what sounded like an oath, beneath his breath. He started to his feet, his hitherto kindly eyes gleaming with tigerish ferocity.

"This thing must be stopped, Lorimer," he cried, "and the only way we're ever a'goin' to do it is to organize and hunt down and hang every galloot of a cattle thief in Montana."

"Train for Sioux City and the West," shouted the doorman. Kent lingered for a moment to shake Lorimer's hand. "Ride over and see me when you git home," he said in parting, "and we'll fix to fix them fellers."

On the train Steve found his companion preoccupied and for the most part sparing of words. "Lori-

mer's my neighbor," he explained gruffly. "Don't live more'n ten mile away. Fur two or three years now, we've be'n troubled with cattle thieves, er rustlers, as we call 'em. They've always be'n so cute that we've never be'n able to ketch 'em, but now, sence they've be'n addin' murder to the list of their accomplishments, it's time to hunt 'em down. You're likely to see some purty lively times, boy, 'fore it's over with."

"I hope you'll ketch 'em all right," Steve ventured. "God help 'em if we do!" was the grim reply. And Kent relapsed into a reverie so profound that Steve left him undisturbed with his thoughts.

CHAPTER IV.

It is not the purpose of this history to give in detail the incidents consequent upon the westward journey of Steve and his employer. It is sufficient to know that at noon the next day they were set down at the then thoroughly cosmopolitan town of Yankton, where the raw young eastern boy saw his first glimpse of western life. An outfitting station for miners, and a general receiving and distributing point for the vast country surrounding it on all sides, hither flocked specimens of every phase of life known to our modern civilization—from the meek mild-looking young theologian seeking a fitting place where he might enter into the fight with the world, the flesh and the devil, to individuals whose name was legion; any one of whom could have given him points on deviltry the like of which he never dreamed.

Among the mixed population of this frontier town, Kent moved like a king. Now in close consultation with respectable business men, now hobnobbing with ranchmen and cowboys, and again elbowing his way through a crowd of gamblers and desperadoes, he was ever the same sturdy, reliable character, known to all and respected by everyone. Close at his heels always came Steve, silent, observant, seeing and noting everything in minute detail, already laying the foundation of what afterward made him a reliable and successful business man. Before leaving Yankton, Kent invested in a large supply of winter clothing, and by his advice Steve purchased two complete

outfits for himself, not forgetting the wide hat so much in vogue among the cattle men.

Two days after their arrival, a great, noisy side-wheeler came puffing to the dock, and when she again swung out into the turbid current, Guy Kent and his young companion were among the passengers, now on the home stretch. Missouri river steamboats carried motley crowds in those days; mine owners, tourists, civil engineers, missionaries, ranchers and cattle men mixing freely with miners, immigrants, cowboys, Indians, Chinamen, gamblers, confidence men and thieves.

In a snug nook behind the wheelhouse Kent found quarters for himself and Steve. There they piled up their belongings and were fairly comfortable, while as to food they accepted such as was provided at the common table. Amusement was not lacking during the six-hundred-mile sail up the mighty river; the very nature of the strangely mixed company on board precluded all idea of that. There were times when a prayer meeting was going in the cabin, a dance on the upper deck, and a bloody fight in the bar. Naturally of a retiring though not of a timid disposition, young Larkin had so far avoided all chances of getting into trouble, but one night his love of justice and fair play caused him to get into an affray that might have resulted seriously.

He had sauntered into an after cabin where gambling was going on, and stood quietly watching the play. Among the players were two, seated at a small table. One was a pale, delicate youth fresh from an eastern city, the other a big, bullet-headed ruffian, still young in years, but old in vice. The eastern man had been drinking heavily, and was rash; when four queens appeared in his hand he promptly bet one hundred dollars and called his opponent. The other as promptly raised him a hundred, and, as

he did so, deftly slipped a card from his sleeve to his hand.

"I see your bid and raise you another," began the eastern man. But Steve interrupted him.

"Wait," he cried; "don't raise his bid. He's cheatin' you."

"Yer a —— liar," shouted the gambler.

"You're the liar," shouted Steve, now thoroughly aroused. "I seen you take a card from your sleeve."

The gambler dropped his cards and started up. "I'll learn you somethin' 'bout mindin' your own business, you tender-foot-ed ——," he bellowed. "I'll break your cussed neck."

"You ain't man enough," yelled Steve. "Come on."

The other needed no second invitation. He "came on" much after the manner of a mad bull, only to receive a sledge-hammer blow under the ear that bowled him over in the corner. He was on his feet in an instant, his mouth full of savage oaths, his hand already on the butt of his revolver, when a sharp voice rang out from behind: "Throw up your hands!"

The hands went up promptly, for Guy Kent stood in the door with his revolver leveled full at the gamester's head. "Good boy, Steve," he said in his quiet voice. "I've seen and heard it all. You lammed this here galoot in due and ancient shape, jes's you'd ought to 'ave done. He sez you lie, and you say he lies. Now, le's hev it right. I'll hold this blummy level, while some o' you fellers take away his gun, and go through his sleeves."

The ruffian winced, but all to no purpose. His revolver was taken from him, after which he was allowed to lower his hands that a pair of sturdy ranchmen might search him. The search was re-

warded by the discovery of a king, two queens and an ace all tucked up in his sleeve.

"Now," concluded Kent, "fore you're kicked out o' here, let me tell yeh that yeh kin hev yer gun when yeh leave this boat for good. It'll be empty, too. Yeh kin kick him out now, gen'lemen."

The kicking out process was promptly executed, for there was honor in the rough party there, and the episode for the time being was closed. They saw but little of their gambling acquaintance until a day before their own landing. Then, as he was leaving the boat at a frontier town, Kent handed him his weapon with the remark, "Here's your gun, sonny. Be careful how yeh use it."

He was answered with a scowl and the words, "I ain't done with you yet; I'll see you ag'in."

"Wall, mebbe," laughed Kent. "And then it'll possibly be under what they call more favorable circumstances."

During the remainder of the trip there were no further incidents worthy of note. Steve's eyes had become weary of the dreary landscape—tired of prairie, bottom and bluff, alternating with bluff, bottom and prairie; tired of the few isolated ranches near the river, tired of the muddy, swift-flowing stream itself, weary of the crowded boat with its noise, its confusion, its vile smells, and its dirt.

The boat swung into the Yellowstone on the sixth day, and it was at daylight on the morning of the seventh day from Yankton, that Kent aroused him from sleep and delighted him with the remark, "Lively now, youngster! Let's git our flittin' together. We'll be to our landin' in an hour."

Presently there appeared on the southern shore a rude landing near where a long, low ranch stood beneath some cottonwood trees. A shrill whistle from the boat quickly brought several red-shirted wide-

hatted men into view, who at once ran down to the landing, made fast the lines that were thrown them, and began without delay to unload boxes, barrels and bales marked, "Pike's Landing."

When the goods had all been unloaded and the Mountain Queen had gone on her way with a final screech of farewell Kent was warmly greeted by all. Steve was introduced and given a rather careless reception. Men fresh from the east were held in good natured contempt in those days, and while Larkin was shrewd enough to perceive this, it was something he had anticipated, and it only whetted his determination to spare no effort that would insure him the respect and confidence of those with whom he must associate.

"Major's expectin' yeh to breakfast," said one of the men.

"Jes' what I'm expectin' myself," returned Kent, coolly. "Steve 'n me hes et 'bout a peck o' dirt apiece sense we've be'n on that durned ol' tub, and a change is necessary. Gether up yer partic'lar plunder, boy. I'll send th' team fur th' rest to-morra."

At the door they were met by the proprietor, a man yet in early middle life, tall, erect and of a decided military bearing, his soldierly appearance being greatly enhanced by his thin, handsome face, keen gray eyes and heavy, drooping mustache. Such was Major Elihu Pike, at one time an officer in the Union army, now the successful proprietor of one of the largest and finest of Montana ranches.

"I am sorry that Mrs. Pike is not at home," he explained, as he led the way to a pleasant sitting room. "She is away on a visit to our friends in the east, but Dick will do his best for us, I think."

"They ain't no doubt about that," observed Kent, with the air of a man who had been there before.

While the two older men fell into an animated dis-

cussion on the state of the cattle market, Larkin had ample time to look about him. He was surprised to find so pretty and so comfortable a room in this far western country. All his knowledge of the outside world had been derived from reading, and he had been led to believe that few of the comforts of eastern civilization were to be found beyond the Mississippi. Yet here, hundreds of miles west of that stream, he found himself in a room the like of which he had seen but few times in his life. A good carpet was on the floor, the windows were prettily curtained, and the walls hung with excellent paintings, and engravings. There was a well-filled bookcase, a table holding a pile of magazines and papers, a piano stood in a corner, and there was no lack of comfortable chairs and sofas. Ignorant of the world as the boy was, he could not help feeling that the room and its tasty arrangements were incomplete without the presence of her whose womanly instincts and exquisite taste had made this nook in the wilderness what it was.

Major Pike must have divined his thoughts, for pausing a moment in his talk with Kent, he turned to Steve and said: "Do you like the room? Yes? Most people do. It's the work of Mrs. Pike, you know. She likes to have things nice, and," a flush of tender pride crossing his fine face, "God bless her! she deserves to have them, too. That is her photo on the table, there. You may look at it if you wish."

An examination of the picture revealed the face of a woman of thirty-eight to forty years—a tender, womanly face, with the abundant brown hair drawn smoothly back from a fine forehead. There was a look of sadness in the dark eyes, and the rather wide mouth had a pathetic droop not wholly in keeping with the firm jaw and determined pose. Steve was absorbed in the picture, when the major spoke again.

"Well, what do you think of her?" he asked, with a smile.

Larkin flushed like a guilty schoolboy. "I guess I ain't much on judgin' faces, Major Pike," he said slowly, "but I don't think anybody could make a mistake in this one. I can't exactly find words to tell you as I'd like to, but if I was sick, er hungry, er was in trouble, an' didn't hev no friends to speak of, I'd go straight to her, 'cause I know I could trust her."

Major Pike's face grew strangely tender. He nodded approvingly and said, "You are a good judge of faces, Mr. Larkin."

At table, while doing justice to the fried chicken, hot biscuits and coffee, the late operations of the cattle thieves were discussed.

"Did they hit you, major?" Kent asked.

"Well, yes," was the reply. "They got away with about twenty-five head of cattle and a dozen horses. They hit you a little, too, Mr. Kent, for they took one of the horses you left here when you went away."

Kent muttered a word of impatience.

"Which one?" he inquired.

"The little gray, the one your man rode. He was with a small bunch of mine, down in the little valley, and they were all rustled in one night."

The ranchman applied himself to his meal, and when he spoke again it was in a voice full of dogged determination. "Major," he said, "this is the second time our stock has be'n run off right under our noses, and we hain't be'n able to do nothin' about it. I, fur one, don't propose to stand it any longer. We've got to organize, hunt these galloots down, and hang 'em, they ain't no other way."

"You forget," said the major, "that the rustling took place nearly a month ago, and that our stock, wherever it is, has been disposed of long ere this."

"I don't furgit nothin'," persisted Kent. "I know

that what's lost is lost; and I know they won't come back again after more fur mebbe two er three years. Leastwise, till they think we've kind o' forgot. I propose that we organize now, and be ready for 'em enny time."

"I agree with you perfectly as to organizing," said the major. "When shall we do it?"

"Jes' as quick's Lorimer gits home. Then all of yeh set a day and we'll fix to fix 'em."

Breakfast over, they went out on to the cool, pleasant veranda, where Kent soon found a chair and leisurely filled his pipe. "Steve'll hef to have a hoss," he observed, when he had plied the match and puffed away in silence for a moment.

"True," asserted their host. "Aleck, you and Mart round up the horses in the corral. Mr. Kent's horse is in the stable."

The two cowboys started away and he called after them: "I saw the horses drinking at the river a few moments ago; they can't be far away."

Steve watched with keen interest the two lithe, active young men as they led their saddled ponies from the stable, and vaulting to their backs, gallop over the swelling ridge back of the buildings, horse and man seeming to be of a piece. But he said nothing to Kent's kindly meant remark, "See them fellers, Steve; don't you wish you could ride like that? Mebbe yeh will some day," for he had confidence in himself, knowing that he could ride well already.

Thirty minutes later there came the sound of galloping hoofs and hallooing men, and a herd of thirty or forty beautiful American horses came thundering over the ridge, swerved to the right with almost one accord and disappeared behind the stables into the waiting corral, toward which the party on the veranda immediately hurried.

"All of these horses have been saddled," the major

explained to Steve, as they stood watching the handsome animals go careering about the half-acre inclosure, "and you may take your choice of them."

"Do you mean me to buy one of them?" asked Steve, bluntly.

"As you please about that. I will sell you any horse here, or you may borrow one to ride to Mr. Kent's place, and return him at your leisure."

"I guess they's hosses on my ranch, yit, Steve," observed Kent, drily.

"I haven't any doubt of that, Mr. Kent," the boy responded, "but I'd kind o' like to hev a horse of my own, you know. You won't mind if I buy one, will you?"

"Certainly not," cried the ranchman; "but th' hull bunch if yeh feel like it." Steve decided in a moment that if anything there should suit him he would buy, and he said so, leaving the whole group, including the two cowboys, exchanging amused glances at the persistence of this green young tenderfoot, and wondering where his choice would fall. Entering the corral alone, Larkin stood watching the horses go scurrying past, until his eyes fell on a beautiful dapple gray gelding, which he eagerly observed from all sides. Suddenly he called out, "How much for the dapple gray?"

"Fifty dollars," responded the major.

"I'll take him," came back the quick reply, and the two cowboys laughed aloud in pleased anticipation.

Back to where the men were standing, Larkin walked. "I'll pay yeh fur him now," he said, producing a roll of bills.

"Hadn't you better wait till you've tried him?" suggested the major. "Perhaps he may not suit you."

"Oh, he suits me all right enough," was the ready reply. "Only if anything should happen to him 'fore

we git away from here, I'd like to know it was my own horse's neck I'd broke," and he put the purchase price into the major's hand.

"Shall I rope him fur yeh?" asked Aleck, with a knowing leer.

Larkin flashed him an inquiring look, and quickly comprehended. "No," he replied, "I guess not. I'd much ruther ketch him myself. If you fellers 'll let the rest of 'em out of the yard, all but the gray and two or three more, I'll be obliged to yeh, and—say, I'll haf to hev a bridle, I s'pose.

"Ain't yeh goin' to use no saddle?" inquired Aleck.

"Not yit," was the brief answer.

In a few minutes the horses had all left the corral except the gray and three others. The little knot of ranchmen had taken their stations in the gate and Steve, in the cowboy costume he had adopted before leaving the boat, entered the inclosure alone, with a bridle hanging over his arm, and walked slowly toward where the half wild horses stood.

Murmuring low, caressing words, the stalwart young figure advanced with outstretched hands to within a few yards of where the little group of animals stood curiously regarding him. A step too near, and they threw up their heads and fled snorting around the corral, coming to a halt again in his near vicinity. Again he approached them, crooning in a low monotone, and again he apparently failed in his object. Half a dozen times the operation was repeated, without success, and the impatient Mart exclaimed: "Pshaw, major, he'll never ketch that hoss that way. Let me rope 'im fur 'im."

"I don't see that this is enny o' your fun'ral, Martin," drawled Kent. "The hoss belong to Steve, an' I'd like to see him ketch him on his own theory. I notice one thing—he's gettin' nearer to that gray ev'ry time he stops."

CHAPTER V.

Straight south from Major Pike's buildings ran a broad trail, sharply marked on either side by deeply rutted wagon tracks, and out upon this trail, and up the long slope leading from the river, rode our two travelers, bound for Kent's ranch, fifty miles to the southward.

It was a clear, sunny September morning, cool and pleasant, with a light carpet of hoar frost still lying here and there in shaded places; a morning rare, exhilarating, with an air that strung up the nerves and sent the blood bounding through the veins; a morning full of the joy and ecstasy of life, such as takes hold of the memory and nestles there to return at intervals, and be lived over and over again in times of perplexity and trouble.

Young Larkin was in high spirits. There are few of us who are not susceptible to well-deserved praise, and Steve is to be pardoned if he felt a thrill of exultation at the encomiums called forth from all the ranchmen by his superb exhibition of horsemanship. He realized that if he would live among the people with whom fortune had cast his lot, he must win his way into their estimation; and he felt that in the morning's work he had made a good beginning. Though utterly untried, his was a sanguine nature. Stung to the quick by his father's parting taunt, all the latent ambition and determination in his makeup had come to the front, and he asked only the privi-

lege of meeting the new life at its own terms. Aside from glimpses had from the deck of the steamboat, he had but a crude idea of the vast country into which he had come, but his thorough course of reading stood him in good stead and he was quite prepared for the rapidly unfolding panorama of grassy prairie, shifting sand dune, green bottom, and tree bordered watercourse, all of which presented themselves in unending succession as the horses ambled easily along.

The ride was one he never forgot. Away to the southwest, over the long swell of the prairie, appeared a misty bulk of purple mountains, and there Kent told him, ran the Big Horn, near which Custer and his men had died. At that time the Custer massacre was an event still fresh in the minds of men, and it was with genuine sorrow that Steve thought of his boyhood's hero going out there into those peaceful looking mountains to die.

About and around them all was calm and sweet and still. Over their heads a solitary turkey buzzard floated noiselessly, and once, when a prairie hen with her little brood flitted across the trail and disappeared into the thick seclusion of a matted bush, the boy's mind flew across the intervening hundreds of miles to his home, and he was, for the moment, back in the old farmyard near the Mohawk, watching the guinea chicks scuttle under the burdock leaves, and listening to the warning cry of the mother fowl, as with head askew, she watched the hawk sailing overhead.

He was thus occupied with his thoughts when his horse made a sudden bolt, and he found himself sprawling on the soft turf. He scrambled to his feet to find Kent holding a trembling gray horse by the bridle, his good-humored face expanded into a

broad grin. Steve looked up with crestfallen inquiry in his eyes.

"Rattler," said the ranchman laconically. "Hosses ain't got no sort o' use fur 'em. Smell him?"

Steve confessed to a sickish, diaspreeable odor. "Do you see him?" he asked.

"Nope, but I kin smell him and hear him, can't you?"

"I hear something like a big bumblebee," said Steve.

"That's him, and he ain't fur off; under that bush there, I guess. You're on yer feet; slip down to th' run there 'n git a club. 'Tain't no kind of a job to kill him."

When Steve had returned with a stout cudgel, Kent pointed to a nearby bush. "He's under there," he said. "Don't take no chances, but hit him hard."

Under the bush indicated, coiled ready to spring, with crested head and open mouth, through the horrible fangs of which the forked tongue was playing like lightning, Steve found, and with one swift stroke slew, his first rattler.

"Well done, boy!" cried Kent, as his companion, lifting the wriggling body of the big snake on his stick, threw it clear of the bush. "Now put yer heel on his head, and when yer sure of him, pull his rattles. I'm mighty shy of them fellers sence I got nabbed onc't—but never mind that. He's dead enough. Pull off th' rattles. Yet must always save th' tail of yer first rattler."

"Seventeen," said Steve, a moment later, holding up his trophy.

"Big feller," grunted the ranchman. "Well, Stephen, my boy, I guess you're the man fur my mutton. I'd 'a' got off and killed that snake myself ef I hedn't wanted to try yeh. I've seen yeh in two or three purty tight places, and yeh was there ev'ry

time. Better mount, now, er we won't git to the Rogerses to grub."

Larkin scented a snake story, and was yet too much of a boy to let the opportunity to hear a good one pass by.

"Mr. Kent," he said, "you said jes' now that you'd be'n nabbed onc't by a snake. Would y' mind tellin' me 'bout it?"

"I wouldn't mind a bit," the ranchman returned. "A good many years ago, when I wan't much older than you be now, I was herdin' sheep fur Bostwick, old Jim Bostwick, up in Colorado. Old man Bostwick was a funny sort o' feller, what some folks down east 'd call a 'character'; but he was a pi'neer in sheep ranchin' an' his flocks covered two big ranges 'bout seventy-five mile apart. One night jes' 'fore shearin' time, he says to me, he says, 'Kent, you git up airly t'morrer mornin' and take this letter over 't foreman on 'tother place.' Nex' mornin' I was all saddled up 'gin daylight havin' th' letter and a snack o' grub in my haversack which I meant t' eat when I got t' Fifty Mile spring, as we called it, when out runs Bostwick with a big bottle o' whiskey in his hand. 'Here, Kent,' he says, 'take along this bottle o' pizen to the boys up there, and tell 'em 't hev a drink on th' ol' man.' An' I started off with th' first, and last bottle o' whiskey I ever carried. Must a' be'n one o'clock when I got t' th' spring, staked out my hoss, and sot down on a big old log under a shady tree t' eat my grub. After eatin' I pulled out my pipe and was injoyin' a good smoke, when I hears a rattler, and begins t' smell him, too. There he was, layin' right to the end of the log, which bein' holler, I s'pose he'd crawled out of. I perceeded t' make a fool of m'self without delay. I found a long pole, and mountin' th' log, stood on its end while I prod-

ded Mr. Snake t' see him strike at the pole, and to hear his rattles sing. More'n a bushel o' fun was fallin' t' my share when of a sudden th' rotten wood give way and I went Kerflop! right down on top of th' snake. I hadn't more'n lit 'fore he had his fangs smang into my hand, ner it wasn't a minute 'fore he hed his head smashed; but then I begun t' realize that I was badly snakebitten, and was fifty miles frum human help. They wasn't much time t' think; my hand begun t' pain me and to swell up right away, and though I tried t' suck out th' pizen I soon seen it was no go, and was jus' beginnin' t' think of what a bloated, spotted, disgustin'-lookin' corpse I'd be when they found me, when my eye happened t' fall on that bottle o' whiskey peepin' out o' my haversack. I staggered up to it, and throwin' myself on th' ground, pulled th' cork, and settin' th' bottle to my mouth, let her run and run and run, till they wasn't a drop left fur th' boys er no one else.

"Didn't it make me drunk? Wa'al, Stephen, I've no recollection of bein' intoxicated that day ner night, but th' nex' mornin' I hed all th' symptoms of hev'in' be'n on an awful tear. The' danger of death frum snakebite was past, and I delivered the letter that day 'bout noon."

"How does whiskey cure snakebite?" Larkin inquired.

"Case o' one pizen fightin' another," Kent explained. "Snake pizen thickens th' blood so'st it can't run, whiskey pizen send it gallopin' 'long so fast it can't stop. Bimeby th' snake pizen loses its strength, leavin' th' pashent with nothin' t' do but git over his whiskey pizen."

Steve spent a moment in meditation, then asked: "How many rattles did that snake hev, Mr. Kent?"

"He was a sort of Methuseler, I reckon," was the

reply, "hed twenty-nine, which I've got 'em yit, tucked away som'ers."

Later on, the twain met an Indian family, moving. The head of the house (?), as became a lord of creation, was stretched in lazy, dirty majesty upon a sort of litter made of poles, and dragged by a miserable pony, while his equally squalid squaw and papooses trudged, heavily laden, by his side. Steve viewed the party with lively curiosity. "Have you got many of 'em around here?" he asked.

"Oh, we've got enough of 'em, such as they be," Kent answered, contemptuously. "They've hed th' tuck purty well took out of 'em and ain't got the sperrit to raise the devil enny more. Them yonder is a good fair specimen of what they 'mount to, now."

"Have you ever be'n troubled by 'em much?" asked Steve. Kent cast a rather pitying glance at his questioner and exclaimed: "Hev I ever be'n bothered with 'em much? Well, I should think I had. I've be'n here nigh on to fifteen year now, and durin' that time my ranch has be'n cleaned out three times, hundreds of my cattle have be'n drove off, and more than a dozen of my cow-punchers killed; I should think they *hed* troubled me," he added musingly.

Fond of stories of adventure, Larkin risked another question. "Did they ever hurt you?" was his simple, direct query.

For the first time since their acquaintance Steve saw a stern, almost savage look creep into Kent's eyes, and his face hardened perceptibly. "Aye, boy," he answered, in a deep, grave tone, "they've chased me and they've ketched me; they've shot me with arrers and they've plugged me with bullets; they've slashed me with knives, and they've come purty nigh burnin' me with fire. Sometime, mebbe, when I'm in th' humor, I'll tell yeh some of th' things I've be'n through sence I hit th' trail. But we're purty

night to Rogerses. Ther's a couple of his men and a bunch of his cattle, now."

To the right of where the trail skirted a swelling ridge, appeared a broad, shallow valley, through which ran a little stream. The grass grew luxuriantly there, green and lush, and feeding upon it were hundreds of fine fat steers. Near the outskirts of the herd a mounted cowboy rode slowly along, and on a rise of ground opposite, another sat his horse so still that man and beast seemed like a single piece of bronze. The cattle were mostly grades of the well-known beef breeds. They were all quietly feeding, and there in the still September sunshine, they, with their accompanying guards, made a scene at once full of peace and rural contentment. Kent, making a speaking trumpet of his hands, raised them to his lips and sent a long, mellow "Hal-lo-o," across the pasture, a call powerful and clear, and yet so soft and soothing that scarcely an animal raised its head. From the cowboys came back the same long, soft cry, but as neither showed a disposition to come nearer, the twain rode on. "Rogers hes got that bunch 'bout ready fur market," Kent explained. "He's jes' baitin' 'em on th' good feed clos't 't th' buildin's 'fore they go down th' river."

Thirty minutes later they rode down the long slope toward where a straggling group of ranch buildings had been built beneath the cottonwoods on the bank of a small river. Not a person was in sight when they drew rein in front of the door, but the noisy welcome from the throats of a half dozen dogs quickly drew the proprietor himself to the rescue. It seemed to the young easterner that in the person of Simeon Rogers, he had set eyes upon the real, simon-pure ranchman of his reading and of his imagination.

Tall, lean and straight, his long brown hair flow-

ing back over a well-shaped head, his heavy moustache, and imperial worn à la Buffalo Bill, Rogers was the plainsman idealized. Strength, determination and character were stamped on his rugged face.

"Another man to bank on," thought the boy on the instant, and in later days he found his first, hasty judgment to have been correct.

Rogers gave a hearty welcome to Kent and acknowledged his introduction to Steve. "Grub's on," he announced briefly. "Got a full flooring to-day, but I reckon we'll make out. Here, François, take charge of these horses and see that they have a feed!" A Frenchy-looking half-breed appeared from somewhere, and led the animals away, the men following their host into a long, low-ceilinged room, where at least a dozen men were seated at a table spread with plain but hearty food.

"Men all your'n?" Kent asked, as they washed themselves at a rude sink.

"All but three of 'em. That young feller with the red lasso round his neck, sittin' there at the end of the table, has got a ranch up Mizpah river way, som'ers. Two of his men are with im; they're lookin' round a little, and stopped for grub."

The appearance of Kent and his companion at table caused but little stir, and conversation, except between the two ranchmen, lagged. All men there were distinctively of the cowboy type in manner and general appearance, except the chief guest from "Mizpah river way," who combined in his apparel a divided dash of the city rowdy with the picturesque attire of the plainsman. His smoothly shaven face was well enough, neither was it lacking in intelligence, but the jaw was heavy and brutal, the eyes shifty and uncertain. Instead of the regulation blue flannel shirt of the cowboy, this man wore a garment of loud red and white check, that certainly had been once

"boiled." A high white collar of doubtful cleanliness encircled his short, thick neck, and this was bound down by a tie of flaming hue. A great display of watch chain crossed his gaudy vest, a companion-piece to the flashing pin on his bosom.

Unsophisticated boy, as Larkin was, he intuitively formed likes and dislikes on first impressions, and like most others addicted to a similar practice, he had ever found that first impressions are almost always the best ones. He disliked the man of the heavy jaw and shifty eyes, his preconception being strengthened by the other's present appearance and conduct. He had scarcely taken his seat and been helped by a grizzled old serving man to a generous portion of the prevalent cornbread, boiled beef and potatoes, when he observed the man of the necktie casting furtive glances his way. For an instant he caught a fleeting stare from a pair of mocking eyes, then they were turned to the man sitting next, with a low-voiced remark at which both seemed highly elated, and the young easterner was at once treated to sly glances from others and much half-suppressed merriment.

Now, the average man can endure censure, open reproof and a certain amount of actual abuse, but ridicule, never. By the time the meal was over, the giggling and tittering had spread to half the table, all unobserved by the proprietor, who was absorbed in an earnest discussion with his friend and neighbor. Steve was deeply moved and angered. His only fault, he knew, was the fact that he was a stranger, and from the east. As before said, he was not unprepared for such treatment, and he had determined beforehand that, given the opportunity, he would at least prove his metal against unprovoked insults from whatever source.

The men clattered noisily from the table, leaving

the two proprietors still talking. Steve soon followed, taking a station near the door, where he stood apparently unnoticed by any until François called to him from the stable door, "You hoss hab ze foot on top ze rope, m'seu. Come queek," he cried.

Walking rapidly toward the stable, Larkin had accomplished half the distance, when a lull fell on the watching crowd, and he heard a sneering voice say, "Now give it to him! Make the tenderfoot jump, once!"

Instantly there came the crack of a revolver, and Steve felt his hat turn on his head. It took every nerve he possessed to keep on his way without giving a sign, but being half prepared, his self-control sustained him and he coolly entered the stable. A moment later he came out and marched straight up to the group of cowboys, on whom a spell of silence seemed to have fallen. For a full minute he stood, silently turning his flushed face and angry eyes from one to another of the men before him; the stillness was oppressive, when, taking off his hat and displaying a bullet hole in its broad brim, he said:

"This is a new hat, and cost me five dollars in Yankton. I don't mind the cost of the hat so very much, fur mebbe I kin git another. You fellers have be'n hevin' consider'ble fun with me sence I've be'n here, and now you wind up with sp'ilin' my hat. I've always heard that them that will dance hed ought to pay the fiddler, an's you've hed yer fun, some of yeh has got to settle, or at least give me a fair chance to square accounts with yeh."

Without hesitation he took off his coat and laid it on a nearby bench, then, once more facing the men, continued:

"Where I come from we've got a way of settlin' such little things as this. If the man that fired that

shot will peel and step out here, one of us will take a lickin'."

A tall, fine looking young fellow of about Steve's age stepped forward and offered his hand:

"Say, young feller," he blurted, "you're the stuff. I'm the feller that fired that shot, and I'm doggoned if I ain't sorry I done it. It was a low-down mean trick, if it wan't only done in fun. I ain't got nothin' to fight you about, and I ain't a'goin' to do it, onless I haf to. My name's Dave Campbell, and I want to be a friend o' your'n."

Steve looked into the blue eyes of the other and saw that he was in earnest. All traces of anger cleared from his face and he shook Campbell's hand heartily. "My name's Steve Larkin," he said, and he would have followed with more, had not Rogers and Kent appeared in the doorway just then. Rogers took in the situation at a glance and demanded:

"What's up, here?"

Campbell answered readily:

"I tried to razzle-dazzle this young feller and he won't stand it. Offered to lick me."

"Don't blame him," grunted Rogers.

"I could 've told yeh that," chuckled Kent.

"I reckon you youngsters had better quit now," resumed Rogers. "Mr. Kent, let me introduce Mr. Lawson. Mr. Lawson, shake hands with Mr. Kent."

The man of the red necktie acknowledged the introduction with the usual platitude,

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Kent," in a peculiarly smooth, oily tone that caused Larkin to look quickly around, for the voice that greeted Mr. Kent was the same that had advised Campbell to fire the shot. The latter noted the glance, and smiled as he said, "Gorjus sort o' cuss, ain't he?" looking at Steve keenly. "I don't b'lieve you hanker after him a hull lot."

"Mebbe not," was the guarded reply. "You know him?"

"Never seen him till he come here to-day fur grub. Seems to be a pleasant kind o' rooster, but I don't like the looks of them two bullwhackers of his. I ain't got any use fur a greaser, and one of 'em's that."

Steve looked at Lawson's two men, who stood together near the corner of the stable. Rogers's cowboys were all of the distinctively American type, tall, lean and athletic, with the frank, open faces of their race, while in the two strangers he had never seen two more villainous-looking men. One was unmistakably a Mexican, short, broad and dark, with a coarse, heavy countenance, from which looked forth a pair of restless, terrier-like black eyes. The other was as unmistakably an Englishman, of middle height, blue-eyed and red-haired, but his freckled face was none the less coarse and brutal, a long red scar extending from cheek bone to chin not serving to enhance its beauty.

"How d'yeh like 'em?" queried Campbell, following Steve's inspection.

"Jes' 's well's I like their boss," was Larkin's quiet reply.

"Then you like 'em same 's I do. Step over here and I'll give yeh a knockdown to th' boys. Gen'l-men, this 'ere feller's Steve Larkin, an' he's all right."

"The boys" all bowed stiffly, and one of them drawled out, "Didn't take you long to find that out, did it, Dave?"

"Oh, come off," cried Dave, a little sheepishly. "Can't you fellers see that this 'ere tenderfoot's a dead game man?"

"You bet he is!" chorused the crowd, and Steve,

not a little pleased with his peaceful victory, went through a handshake with them all.

Kent came bustling up.

"Come, Stephen," he called. "We must be mosey-in' along. Mr. Lawson and his men air ridin' our way and we'll keep 'em company."

With the hearty good-byes of Rogers and his men ringing in their ears, the five men forded the stream in front of the ranch buildings, and once more hit the southern trail leading away over the rolling country toward where the distant mountains reared their faint blue bulk on the horizon line. In front rode Guy Kent, between Steve and Lawson, the companions of the latter bringing up the rear. Early in the ride Mr. Kent introduced his young employee to the stranger from "Mizpah River way," but the sneering nod from the stranger, and the short, distant bow from Larkin, were wholly lost on the honest ranchman.

CHAPTER VI.

As was usual, the conversation was of ranching, the cattle, horse and sheep business, the chances of a railroad being soon built through the country and of the late depredations of the rustlers.

Lawson was sure that the thieves came from the Indian reservation to the southwest, perhaps the Indians themselves, while Kent was equally positive that the mountains near the Wyoming line contained the rendezvous of the robbers.

"It is strange," the young man said in his rich, low voice, "that if they hide in the mountains near the line, they have never paid me a visit. I am much nearer them than you."

"It's a poor dog that kills sheep to home," was Kent's gruff response, "and at the same time your theory ought to work jest as well one way as 'tother—we air nearer the Injuns than you air, yeh know."

This argument seemed a clincher and for some minutes nothing was said on either side. Then Lawson remarked: "Perhaps they won't come again."

"It'll be a mighty fine thing fur 'em if they don't," Kent cried fiercely. "We'll stretch the neck of every mother's son of 'em if they do."

Lawson changed the subject and launched into a prolonged, and Steve thought unnecessary, history of himself. "I was born and brought up in New York city," he announced. "My father has enough of money and he graduated me from Columbia College. After my education was finished he took me into his

office. I had always led an active life and the confinement soon began to tell on me. A slight cold developed a persistent cough and I was forthwith sent to Colorado for my health, which I promptly recovered. I had no desire to return to the east, for I had fallen in love with the free, open life of the mountains and plains. I had plenty of money left me by my mother, and with a little of it bought and stocked my ranch."

Larkin's instinctive dislike for Lawson momentarily increased; he knew he had no good grounds for indulging the sentiment, but untrained and unused to the world as he was, he felt that there was a false note somewhere. On his own slight grievance he dwelt not much, but he could not reconcile the man's coarse, plebeian features with his well modulated voice, no more than his garish attire with his pretensions to wealth and education. That Mr. Kent was pleased with his new acquaintance and interested in his conversation was evidenced by the open admiration in his eyes and the little grunts of approval with which he received the accounts of the narrator's past, and present.

At length the recital became monotonous, and Steve, ceasing to listen, turned his attention instead to the scenery about him. The country was becoming more broken and rugged, the valleys deeper, the long, swelling sand ridges higher, their sides more precipitous. Occasionally a strip of velvety meadow land edged with cottonwoods marked the course of a stream, and anon rugged cliffs and detached rocks of fantastic shape, with here and there a scanty pool of brackish water, indicated an outlying spur of the famous "bad lands." There was no wind, and the voices of nature were still. No sounds fell on the ear except the steady thud of the horses' feet and the patter of the men's voices. Once or twice a prairie

wolf sneaked unnoticed across the trail, and again a small herd of buffalo, the first the young easterner had ever seen, fled with a lumbering gallop over the crest of a distant ridge.

So the ride went on, mile after mile, the strange, new country opening up like the shifting scenes of a great panorama, and so absorbed was our young tenderfoot, that the day was far spent before he came to a realizing sense that the journey must soon end.

The sun was setting when the company reached the top of a hill, and looked down a long, grassy slope on one of nature's fairest scenes. Hundreds of acres of rich, level bottom lands lay below them, and through their midst coursed a shining river. For miles up and down the stream the bright green carpet stretched, while here and there great herds of horses and cattle were feeding. On a slight rise of ground near the river, where some big cottonwoods threw their protecting arches over and around, the spacious buildings of a great ranch appeared, toned down and softened by the last red rays of the departing sun.

Larkin uttered an involuntary expression of surprise and pleasure.

"Like it, do yeh, Stephen?" Kent cried, turning in his saddle and showing a countenance beaming with honest pride. "Well, I'm glad of that, fur I'm pap down there. What do *you* think of it," he said, turning to Lawson.

"It's the finest ranch in Montana, Mr. Kent," came the smooth response. "Here, Sampson, Pedro, you've both ranched it from the Rio Grande to Winnipeg. Where can another such be found?"

The two men, who had been left to entertain each other for the whole distance, rode to the front and solemnly surveyed the scene. The Englishman was first to speak. "They ain't nothink like it nowhere," he said. The Mexican added a touch of Latin en-

thusiasm to his opinion. "Sanctissimo," he exclaimed fervently, "the senior ees bless of the saints! Eet ees wat you call one gar-r-den of Eden!"

"Oh, pshaw!" Kent cried in good natured impatience. "The saints didn't hev anything to do with it. Saints ain't got much use fer a feller't won't hustle."

He touched his horse and cantered down the slope, followed by the whole company. As they approached the great log house, a pair of little darkies, a boy and girl, frightened from their play 'neath the cotton-woods, scuttled into the house like a pair of young partridges seeking shelter. An instant later several dogs of different breeds, headed by a magnificent great dane, came frisking and yelping forth. These were followed by a neat-looking colored man and woman and two or three cowboys who chanced to be off duty.

Guy Kent was on the ground in an instant. "Howdy, Jinny! Howdy, Peter!" he cried, extending a hand to each. "Confound ye, Tige, git down; git down Bull! Can't you dogs let me alone a minnit? Hello, Billy! How are yeh, Tom? Is everything all level? Where's Miss Helen?"

Amid this running fire of exclamations and questions none could get in an answer edgewise. There was no need for an answer to the last question, however, for there came running from the house the loveliest vision Larkin had ever seen. A young girl of about seventeen, tall and beautifully formed, golden-haired and blue-eyed, and dressed in a simple costume of figured muslin, flung herself into the old man's embrace, and with her arms about his neck kissed his bearded lips again and again amid expressions of welcome and pleasure.

Steve glanced at the man from Mizpah river way and saw in his sensual face a look that might have

meant much or little, but which served to increase his dislike, and that disturbed him for many days.

Guy Kent returned the young girl's caresses, then gently releasing himself from her embrace, turned to the two young men, who had dismounted.

"Mr. Lawson," he said, "this is my niece, Miss Helen Fiske. Helen, this other young feller is Stephen Larkin. He's from the east, an's goin' t' stop with us fur a spell."

Lawson acknowledged the introduction with a courtly bow, lifting his hat with the grace of a Chesterfield. Introductions to young ladies had been rare occurrences in Larkin's life. He did not remove his hat, and his short, stiff bow showed a lack of culture. But the eyes that met hers were honest and steady, a fact not unnoticed, as Steve learned in after days.

"Bill, put out mine and Mr. Lawson's horse," Kent said to one of the men, "and show Larkin and these other fellers where th' stable is."

The horses disposed of Lawson's men went off by themselves, seemingly as intent on sight-seeing as was the young easterner, who, having given his horse a thorough rubbing down, spent the remainder of the twilight in strolling about the place and in noting his new surroundings. Used as he was to the great barns of the eastern stock farm, it seemed strange to him that here, where so many horses and cattle were kept, barns should be conspicuous only by their absence. There was a long, low stable, capable of accommodating many horses, and back of this was an enclosure where stood several huge stacks of prairie hay. Near these a great shed faced the stream and helped to form the fence inclosing a well trodden corral. These, with a large building used as a storehouse for grain and tools, completed the outbuildings.

Steve next turned his attention to the house. That,

and was wholly unprepared for the discovery of so rare a musician out in these western wilds.

Lawson clapped his hands and cried, "Bravo, Miss Fiske! Please give us some more."

No response came from the darkened room, and Kent called out: "Play that Eytalian thing I like so well, dear."

Again the fingers touched the keys, and a brilliant overture from a celebrated opera delighted the ears of the listeners. Kent bestirred himself. "Kin yeh sing, Mr. Lawson?" he asked.

"Yes, a little," was the reply. "Some old college songs and such things."

"Then we'll hev some singin'. My gal's as good at that as she is at playin'. Helen, git a light. Mr. Lawson's comin' in to sing with yeh."

The light was brought and Lawson responded with alacrity. From the chair to which Mr. Kent had invited him, Steve could see the twain looking over the music; those on the piazza ceased talking, and Larkin scarcely breathed while the music lasted; then two well trained voices blended in a rollicking old college duet. The singers soon had for an audience every person about the place. The cowboys came and gathered into an appreciative crowd at the piazza's edge, while the colored folks came boldly to the second window, unconsciously keeping time with head and foot when some especially merry tune was rendered, and away back almost out of the circle of light appeared the evil faces of Lawson's men.

For a half hour the impromptu concert went on, a lull following the perfect rendition by Miss Fiske of a peculiarly beautiful solo. Mr. Kent's voice broke the silence. "Men," he said, seemingly addressing his remark to everybody in general, "did yeh ever hear a man sing to a hoss?"

Steve gave a nervous start, but the voice went on.

"One of th' purtiest things I ever heard was a man singin' to a hoss he wanted to ketch, and by George, he ketched him, too. Sung himself right into that critter's heart. Ketched him 'thout any trouble 'tall. That was only this mornin', and this young feller here is the man that done the singin'. Stephen, won't you please sing that song fur us?"

Larkin hesitated. It was a trying situation for the raw youth. Not that the position was one wholly new for he had more than once sang solos at country concerts; but to sing in this strange place to this strange audience, and especially, after what he had heard, before—her! He turned hot and cold by breaths, and was on the point of refusing, when chancing to glance toward the window, he caught sight of Lawson's face wearing a malicious grin, as if enjoying his discomfiture. That, and Miss Helen's pleading invitation, "Please, Mr. Larkin," decided the matter, and with a firm, "I'll try, Mr. Kent," he rose, and passing quickly into the room, stood on the skin of a great grizzly bear spread out before the piano.

The young lady turned on her stool and looked up inquiringly. "Key of A flat, minor, six-eight time, andante movement," he announced, in answer to her glance. Then, striking an unconsciously graceful attitude, his broad chest thrown out, the lamplight falling full on his flushed face, he struck into the sweet old lullaby, "Wind of the Western Sea." In a moment his accompanist caught the movement and was in full sympathy with his mood.

Larkin did nothing for effect. He knew how to sing well, and he sang as well as he knew. Perhaps the sneer of the man, and the coaxing voice of the girl there, had something to do with his success, for success it was. And when at last the plaintive minor notes had died away, there was, even among the most

uncultured of his audience, a sense of delightful appreciation and respect for the man who had thus called back the voices of the mothers who had sung to them as innocent babes.

For a moment Miss Fiske sat still, her hands lying listless upon the keys. Then she raised her head and looked straight into his eyes. "Thank you," she said simply, "you put your heart into your song."

CHAPTER VII.

From the window came the voice of the ranchman, sounding strangely thick and indistinct. "They won't be any more singin' to-night," he said, "not after that."

Steve avoided Lawson's glance, and strode from the room. An hour later, Kent introduced him to "the boys" at their little game in the dining room with these words, "Boys, this ere young feller is Mr. Steve Larkin, from York state. I want yeh all to use him the best yeh know how, fur he's all right." And "the boys," with one accord, chorused, "You bet he is!" and went on with their game without another word.

That night, lying in his comfortable straw cot in the men's quarters over the dining room, Steve reviewed the events of the day, from the breaking of the gray horse at Pike's Landing, to the lullaby sung at the piano, dismissing each as it passed before his mind, falling asleep at last to dream of appreciative blue eyes gazing into his own, and a gentle voice saying, "You put your heart into your song."

Miss Fiske did not appear at breakfast next morning, and in answer to her uncle's inquiry, Peter said she had gone out for a ride over the prairie.

"Does she do much riding?" Lawson asked.

"Ten er twenty miles ev'ry mornin' th' weather'll permit," Kent replied. "They ain't a man in Montany kin beat her on hossback. Most likely she's rid 'cross country to Lorimer's place. She does that often."

"Does she ride alone?" was the next question.

"Ride alone!" the old man chuckled. "You kin jes' bet she rides alone. Ain't 'fraid o' nothin'; kin shoot as good as she kin ride; no danger of her!"

At the conclusion of the meal Kent spoke to his men. "Mr. Lawson wants to buy a bunch o' them grade cows," he said. "Where be they rangin' now?"

Grizzled Bill Wilson wiped the crumbs from his big red mustache, and answered: "'Bout th' mouth of Five Mile crick, I reckon; Matt's got 'em in charge."

The ranchman arose. "Saddle up and round 'em into th' co'ral," he said. "Mr. Lawson, you and your men hed better let yer hosses rest. They'll need it. You kin come, Stephen."

Out into the crisp morning air Steve rode with Kent and three of his men. An hour's steady lope brought them to a broad strip of good pasturage, where a small stream, breaking abruptly from the hills, joined the larger one. Fifty or sixty fine young cows and many calves were feeding there, and rinsing a coffee pot at the brookside was the man in charge. The embers of a small fire were still glowing warm in a sheltered nook by a great rock, and a saddled pony was picketed near by.

Words are seldom wasted on the range. "Howdy, Matt," called the ranchman, pulling up his horse, and the cowboy, after deliberately depositing his utensil on a flat rock to dry, answered: "Howdy, boss! Yer lookin' good. When'd yeh git back?"

"Las' night. Feller up t' th' house wants t' buy some cows—round 'em up t' th' co'ral."

Deftly the cattle men gathered up the straying animals. There was no unnecessary noise or fuss, yet in a few minutes the whole bunch was a compact unit and started for the corral, ten miles away. Now and then some frisky young heifer would create a

diversion by making a break for the open country, but the nimble pony was always there to teach her her place, the herd soon subsiding to a swinging pace, completely under control of the trained hands.

Behind rode Larkin and his employer, the latter evidently in a reminiscent mood. "That was a purty good song you sung las' night," he said, by way of a beginning. Steve was silent, and the old man went on. That song o' yourn took me back most sixty years. I come purty near blubberin' myself, and I'll be blamed ef it didn't make tough old Bill Wilson blow his horn and wipe his eyes mighty suspicious like. I call you a durned good singer, Stephen."

Steve laughed modestly. "I ain't a patch on Miss Fiske," he said.

Kent's eyes glowed with pleasure. "They ain't menny that is!" he cried, bringing his hand down on his thigh with a resounding slap. "Got it in her, Helen hes, but her teachers in Shecawgo hev done a good deal toward developin' of it."

"Then she hes be'n to school in Chicago, hes she?" Steve suggested.

"Hes she!" Kent exclaimed; "hes she! Why, my dear young feller, did you s'pose she'd dug all her p'lite manners and her musical eddication out of th' sile, here at Cotton Run? Wa'll, I guess not; she's most eighteen, now, and she's be'n to a boardin' school in Shecawgo fur four years. She's got two more years to study, an's goin' back in 'bout a week."

"Hes she always lived with you?"

"Wa'll, now, sca'cely. That is to say—yeh see, my sister Marthy married a first-rate kind of a feller named Fiske, 'way back in the east, where he was a perfesser in some high school er other. When Helen was 'bout four years old her father got to coughin' and kind o' runnin' down, and his doctor told him he'd hev to come west and live 'mong th' mount'ins,

er he'd die. So, him and Marthy and th' baby come out and settled in th' Black Hills, near Deadwood, where he done a little minin', 'thout much luck. When they'd been there 'bout four years and he didn't git no better and was on his last legs, Marthy took sick and died. Th' poor feller didn't hev no money, so when he hed laid his wife away he locked up his cabin, left his wuthless minin' claims and mountin' his hoss, come 'cross country here with his little gal. He didn't live only 'bout a month after that; I've done fur the little gal sence. 'Course, I, bein' an ol' bachelder, I never hed no daughter of my own, but I guess I think's much of her 's ennybuddy could. Peter and his wife was brung here to kind o' care fur her, yeh know. Her and Mis' Pike is mighty pouch friends. She rides over there and stays a hull fornit, sometimes. Mis' Pike's a monstrous fine woman. Hope you'll git acquainted with her sometime."

Mr. Kent's discourse was brought to a sudden close by a disturbance among the cattle. A wild-eyed little calf burst from the herd and nimbly avoiding the herdsmen, ran bawling down the back track, to be followed at once by an equally wild-eyed cow, evidently the calf's dam. The whole herd became agitated immediately.

There was a bawling and snorting, a raising of tails and a tossing of horns, the prompt action of Matt in lassoing the little miscreant and restoring him to the ranks preventing what might have been a stampede. The cattle were quite restive after that and Steve got not another word from Mr. Kent until the whole herd was safe behind the gates of the corral. Then he said, "Stephen, will yeh please find Mr. Lawson, and tell him th' cattle is c'ralled?"

Larkin secured his horse and walked toward the house. On the veranda he found the visitor talking to Miss Fiske, who had evidently returned but lately

for she was still wearing a becoming habit and was toying with a light whip. The young man was sure he had never seen anything half so fair as this red-cheeked young woman who gave him so sweet a smile from her bright eyes and whose white teeth flashed so prettily when her lips parted to bid him good morning. "I hear you have been out for a ride," she said.

Almost unconsciously, Steve removed his hat. "Yes, quite a ride," he responded. "I hear you've be'n out, too."

She laughed gayly and said: "Oh, that is nothing for me. I have ridden over twenty miles this morning."

Steve remembered his errand and addressed himself to her companion. "Mr. Lawson," he said, "Mr. Kent asked me to tell you that th' cattle was in th' corral."

Lawson pulled himself together languidly and rose. "All right er—Steve," he drawled, giving the latter an insolent stare. "Excuse me, Miss Fiske. You, er—Steve, clean off my horse well, and have him ready for me in an hour."

The insult was so well directed and so clearly intentional that there was no doubt of its meaning. Lawson was taking this method of humiliating him in Miss Fiske's presence, and the hot blood leaped to Larkin's face. His eyes were glowing with anger as he returned the other's stare. "Sha'n't I clean yer boots fur yeh, too?" he asked, simulating Lawson's drawl. "I'd do that as soon as I'd clean yer horse. I might tie yer necktie fur yeh, if I wasn't afraid I'd burn my fingers a-doin' it, er—Lawson."

With a half-uttered oath Lawson took a hasty step toward him, hesitated a moment, then, half turning to the young lady, said in an apologetic tone. "There's

a lady present, or I'd very soon teach you your place."

To the surprise of both young men, Miss Fiske herself disposed of that question of etiquette. "Don't let my presence interfere with what you may consider your duty, Mr. Lawson," she said, coldly. "If you have anything to teach Mr. Larkin, don't keep your pupil waiting, especially as he seems quite ready to take his lesson."

It was a striking tableau. In the background the girl had risen from her chair, her sparkling eyes and pale face helping to betoken the indignation already displayed in the nervous energy with which the whip slashed her skirt. Before her stood Lawson, fairly bursting with angry humiliation, his thick neck and coarse face of a uniform dull red, his attitude that of one anxious to strike, yet half afraid. Facing him, Larkin waited, his tall form erect, every muscle tense, alert, watching with half-clenched hands every movement of his adversary. The picture lasted for but a moment, then it was shattered by Bill Wilson, who rode up and bawled out, without any respect at all, "Say, you Lawson feller, boss sez ef yeh wanter see them cattle, they're in th' c'ral waitin' fur yeh."

Lawson obeyed the summons at once, bowing a polite farewell to Miss Fiske ere he departed, but taking occasion to hurl a low curse at Steve as he passed him. "I'll get even with you yet," he growled and Larkin not at all intimidated, returned, "Don't lose any time, mister; don't lose any time."

For a moment Larkin stood still, gazing into the young girl's face. "Forgive me," he said, gently. "I shouldn't hev done it while you was here."

Miss Fiske made a move as if she would enter the house. Then she turned, and looking earnestly into his eyes, said: "I don't know as there is anything to forgive. You are alone in a strange country, and if

you do not care for yourself, you will get no care at all. We of the west have some peculiarities, and foremost among them is the fact that we have no admiration for a coward. Good morning, Mr. Larkin."

She closed the door behind her and Larkin made his way back to the corral with a feeling at his heart from which he never recovered.

The next hour was spent in the corral, where Lawson, with the eye of an experienced cattleman, was selecting stock for breeding. When twenty fine young cows had been chosen, he drew forth a buckskin bag well filled with money and paid without a word the round price demanded by the ranchman. A few minutes after, the two assistants, provided with well-filled haversacks, started the cattle on their hundred-mile drive toward the southeast, but their employer, evidently deeply smitten, danced attendance upon Kent's fair niece until the sun was halfway down the western sky. Then he, too, mounted and rode away, much to the satisfaction of her uncle's employee.

The days that followed were full of exciting interest to the young man from the east. He was willing and anxious to learn his new duties, and was of so sunny and obliging a disposition that all with whom he came in contact liked him instinctively. Every man was willing to assist and instruct this bright-faced young fellow, who asked only the privilege of meeting others on the common ground of manhood. He entered unhesitatingly into the rough sports of the cowboys, in which he was the inferior to none and the superior of most; this, with the fact of his superb horsemanship, readily won him a place in the estimation of these men, a good share of whose lives was spent in the saddle. But once, during the first few days of his stay, was he called upon to vindicate

his right to respect, and that time, the cowboy who had flung an insulting taunt at tenderfeet in general, took a fortnight to nurse back to their normal condition the magnificent pair of black eyes painted by the artistic hand of Larkin.

At the ranch, but little was seen of Miss Fiske. Mrs. Pike had returned from her visit to the east, and being the only woman friend the girl had in the country, most of her time was spent at Pike's Landing in preparation for the coming school year at Chicago. Mr. Kent was to escort his niece on her trip east, and as duty and business could be well combined, he planned to ship a few carloads of fat steers at the same time. The fall round-up for cutting out marketable cattle had taken place before Steve's coming, the cattle selected for sale being pastured conveniently near the buildings; thus was his wish to participate in that most exciting of range functions, a "fall round-up," delayed of fruition until another season.

On the Saturday evening before her final flitting, Miss Fiske came home unexpectedly. The men were flocking out from their evening meal, and as is usually the case where one person is the idol of a whole community, an enthusiastic reception was given her.

"How do, uncle?" she cried gayly, as she leaped from the saddle into Kent's arms. "How do, boys?" taking in the whole crowd at one laughing glance. "How is everybody?"

Kent was greatly pleased, and Steve's foolish young heart fluttered and his color rose when she singled him out for a bright little nod.

"Didn't know you was comin' back," the old man chuckled. "Thought yeh hed yer flittin' all ready to Mis' Pike's."

"So I have, uncle, but I hadn't said good-by to all

the boys and to Peter and Jinny, and to the children, so I thought I'd ride over and say it."

That night, while Steve was in the dining room listening to one of Bill Wilson's old-time yarns, Mr. Kent came to him. "Helen didn't know but you'd come to the sittin' room and sing a little," he said.

Larkin hesitated a moment, lest his eagerness betray him; but gave way to Wilson, who broke off his story in its most interesting part to observe, "I ain't a-speakin' fur another galloot at this here table, boss, but I'm the lone k'yote as would like to hear Larkin rope the 'Wind of th' Western Sea,' an' dish it up to us like he done th' night he come, purvidin' you an' Missy'll hev me."

The old man laughed merrily, but his voice was strangely tender. "They ain't a place on my ranch where you ain't welcome," he said. "Bill, you've toted Missy on her shoulder menny's the time, same's I hev, and I guess you and all th' rest th' boys kin come in and hear her and Stephen warble—we won't hear 'em agin fur quite a spell, yeh know."

CHAPTER VIII.

In the comfortable sitting room Kent had furnished for his niece, the men all found seats or lounged about in comfortable positions.

Men were there whose lives had been spent amid the great mysteries of the western wilds; silent men, whose senses had been sharpened and tongues made quiet by constant communion with the solemn stillness of the wilderness; men no longer young, who had ridden with Sheridan at Appomattox, and who had more than once taken a life chance against the wily red foe with scarcely a hope of winning; men who never spoke of their past, and who had left their real names behind them long ago, hardened, irreverent, profane men, who lived in the past, and in the present, with not a thought or a care for the future, yet in whose heart of hearts each carried that inextinguishable spark of filial affection and memory of childhood's days, that is ever ready to spring into flame at the tender touch of an old song.

There was little attempt at classical music, that night at Cottonwood Run ranch. First, a dreamy nocturne dropped from the fingers of the fair pianist, then came songs, mostly of the past, and stirring hymns of the days gone by, with one or two old duets in which the mellow young voices blended perfectly. The men sat silent and subdued, each busy with his own thoughts. In memory's fancy more than one draught was quaffed from the "Old Oaken Bucket," more than one stroll taken with some old-

time "Bonny Eloise of the Mohawk Vale," more than one hour spent away back with "The Old Folks at Home." There came a lull when auld Andy Mac-Nabb, who drove ox-teams, asked for "Annie Laurie," but as Andy volunteered to sing the song himself, and did so very well, indeed, the incident reflected to the credit of the dry old Scot who had never before been known to lift his voice in song. Mac-Nabb's success was so apparent that Peter and Jimmy came to the front with a beautiful plantation melody, and "Red Mike," who had the name of being the "crossest man on the range" when in his cups, crooned "Kathleen Mavourneen" to the satisfaction of all. At the suggestion of Bill Wilson, the whole company united in "The Sweet Bye and Bye," after which Larkin rendered his lullaby, the concert ending with "Sweet Home," sung as a duet by Helen and Steve.

There was blowing of noses and a furtive wiping of eyes when the touching old melody died away, silence for a moment, then Kent rose without a word and left the room, to be followed at once by his men,—thoughtful men for the time being, better men, at least for that hour, for not an oath was uttered in their after talk that night.

Larkin felt an awkward shyness fall upon him when he found himself alone with Miss Fiske. She was still sitting at the piano, idly touching a soft chord here and there, seemingly forgetful of his presence.

The lamplight fell full on the girl's fair hair and pure young face, a face strong, yet full of feminine grace and sweetness, one that had attained early maturity in the varied life its owner had led; a face to be trusted, the young man thought; the face of a woman one could love and trust unto the end. He made a movement as if to go. She turned and faced

him as she had on that memorable first night, lifting her eyes to his as she had done before.

"You have a home?" she queried.

"I have," he answered, "or at least I did have."

"And a father and mother, and perhaps a sister whom you love dearly?"

Larkin hesitated. "I've got a good mother and a father," he said, presently. "I never had a sister or a brother."

A peculiar smile hovered about her lips.

"Have you been much away from home?" she asked.

"I've never be'n away before; jes' stayed to home and worked."

Miss Fiske was silent for a moment, evidently thinking; when she spoke again it was with winning softness. "You will pardon me," she said, "for presuming to offer advice to one almost a stranger, and older than myself; but if you mean to stay here any length of time, perhaps, a word from one used to this life will not come amiss, even if it does come from only a girl."

Steve took a chair opposite, and the girl resumed speech. "You seem to be a nice boy," she began, the frankness of the school girl coming to the surface. Larkin acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow and a rising color. "You are not going to be thrown into the best of society, and many pernicious influences will beset you. I think you are perfectly capable of caring for yourself, and fighting your own battles, but that is not all. It will be very easy for you to fall into the rough, wild ways of your associates, easy to become like them. Most of the men on the ranches are intemperate at times and all of them are profane. I notice that you have lots of what people call 'spunk.' Be careful not to lose your temper without a just cause, for the ways of the

west are not those of the east, and it is not necessary to be quarrelsome to be considered brave. Take my uncle's advice in everything; he is a good man, he likes you, and will do well by you if you do well for yourself. Be the man you think your mother would like you to be." She paused, her sparkling eyes and heightened color betokening her earnestness, then concluded with a merry laugh, as if to hide a trace of embarrassment: "There, sir, wasn't that a good little sermon?"

Larkin was visibly affected; he rose and extended his hand, into which she put hers without hesitation. "Miss Helen," he said, firmly, "thank you fur your good advice, and I'll take it, too. When I'm tempted to go wrong, I'll think of my mother, and I'll think of you, if—if you'll let me, and I know that between yeh both I'll keep in the middle of th' road." He released her hand and moved toward the door, but paused on the threshold. "Mebbe," he stammered, "mebbe. I'll hear from you when you're gone."

"You certainly shall," she returned quickly. "I write home every week, and as uncle is rather a poor correspondent, perhaps you will not mind sending me a few lines occasionally."

Poor Steve! He slept not well that night, and when at last he did drop off, it was to dream that he had received a letter post-marked "Chicago," and when he had broken the seal, there fell from it the picture of a young girl with dark blue eyes and fair hair, and he heard a sweet voice saying: "There, sir, wasn't that a good little sermon?"

steeps, and rode through gloomy stretches of ever-green forest. Once a wolf sneaked across their path, and Campbell, snatching a revolver from somewhere about his clothing, sent a bullet through the animal's head.

"How well you shoot!" cried Steve admiringly.

Dave laughed carelessly. "'Taint nothin'," he said; "ennybuddy kin do it that's a mind t' practice." He stopped to chuckle a little. "Say, Steve," he broke out, "kin you shoot much?"

Larkin acknowledged that his accomplishment in that line had heretofore been confined to a shotgun with only indifferent success. "Why, Dave?" he asked.

"Oh, nothin', only most fellers from the east 'low they kin shoot middlin' good. They was onc't a tenderfoot come to a ranch where I was a cow-punchin' in Colorado. He was alwus braggin' how good he could shoot, but we soon found out he couldn't hit th' head of a bar'l at ten paces. One day I went out an' roped an antelope. I fetched th' little feller in an' tied him to a wagon w'eel. Next mornin' I told this here eastern galloot he could practice on the antelope till we come in frum th' round-up, makin' a purvision that he wa'n't to go no nearer than forty yards. That night w'en we come back, th' wheel was all shot t' pieces, rope shot off an' th' antelope gone; he hedn't teched him onc't."

"Is they any antelopes around here now?" Steve queried.

"Jes' a few; them an' th' buf'lers is about all gone. Mebbe some could be found, 'round in lonesome places,"— casting a keen glance around. "They's a place I'd like t' show yeh, 'bout half an hour from here."

A thirty minutes' ride brought them to a sort of amphitheater, well watered and entirely surrounded

see yeh. How'd yeh come to be here, sleepin' behind yer horse?"

"Oh, I kind o' took a notion to know yeh better, an' knowin' it was a right smart distance, I rid over in the cool of th' evenin'; as to th' sleepin', I kin pound my ear ennywheres."

The friendship between the two young men progressed rapidly, and when, after a breakfast at which a looked-for face did not appear, Campbell proposed that they go for a ride among the foothills to the southeast, Steve accepted the proposition gladly.

The ride was a memorable one, which both young men enjoyed most thoroughly. Campbell had been born in the shadow of the "Rockies," and though young, was well versed in all phases of western life. He had profited well by his experience in forest, camp and field, and had at his command a vast fund of practical knowledge, which he dealt out to his companion in the shape of anecdotes spiced with droll, original humor. On the other hand, Larkin's stories of the quiet home life of the east were equally interesting to the cowboy, whose every idea was wholly in keeping with the scale of magnificent grandeur peculiar to the region in which he had spent his days.

The region through which they rode was a rising upland, where the scenery was greatly diversified. Now, a broad stretch of range land where the bunch grass, lately so brown and dry, was beginning to feel the impetus of the autumnal rains, was succeeded by an area of bad lands, where the only vegetation was a sort of moss clinging to the rocks and boulders that alternated with the sand dunes in making up the general desolation; then a verdant valley through which a tree-fringed stream meandered. Sometimes they explored a canon where trees and bushes and wild flowers grew thickly, scrambled over bare, rocky

much as a steer, an' he ain't wuth half as much. It's a good thing they're gone, I reckon, but they was a powerful lot of good meat wasted while they was a-killin' 'em."

On their return the two made a wide detour to the east, and approached the ranch in a different direction from which they had left it. Once, when within a few miles of the buildings, they rode for some distance down a small stream, and were somewhat surprised to come suddenly upon Mr. Lawson's Englishman and Mexican, lounging under some cottonwoods. Their horses were tied in a thicket, and the men were evidently not anxious to be interviewed, for to the young men's cordial salutation they answered only with a surly nod. When they were out of earshot, Dave remarked: "There's a pair of beauts; what d'yeh s'pose they're monkeyin' 'round here fur?"

Steve was thoughtful. "I'm sure I don't know," he said at last, "but I'll bet yeh a dollar that their boss ain't fur off." And so it proved; when they had cared for their horses, and were walking toward the house, they saw sitting on the veranda not only Kent and his niece, but also the young rancher from "Mizpah River way."

With Lawson, Steve did not come into contact that day. Jinny provided him and his friend with a lunch in the dining room, after which Campbell prepared to go. While they were in the stable saddling the latter's horse, Mr. Kent and his guest passed the open door on the way to a nearby stall, where Lawson's mount was standing. The ranchman seemed in the best of spirits, and was talking volubly. "Give my best regards to th' majer, when yeh git t' fort," he was saying, "and don't furgit t' come ag'in when yeh kin stay longer. Course, things won't be quite so agreeable when Helen's away, but

we'll try to do th' best we kin by yeh. When yer in Shecawgo, yeh must do as yeh agreed and call on Helen! she'll be glad to see yeh. Pity yeh didn't hev one or two of yer men with yeh fur comp'ny."

"Oh, I couldn't spare them off the range," Lawson replied. "The two I had here with me come along when I have use for them, but at this busy season they must stop at home and run things while I am away." Steve turned to his friend with a question in his eyes.

"What d'ye think of that lie?" he asked.

"I think," was Dave's decided answer, "that Mr. What's-his-name an' his men will bear watchin'."

CHAPTER X.

Ten minutes after Campbell's form had disappeared over the ridge to the north, Lawson bade an effusive farewell to the Kents and rode away in the same direction. When he was out of hearing, Steve turned to his employer. "Mr. Kent," he said, "what d'ye s'pose Lawson told yeh he was alone fur? Dave and me seen and spoke to them two men o' his this afternoon 'long a crick two er three miles up here."

Kent laughed heartily. "Don't be so s'picious, Stephen," he said. "I know yeh don't hanker after Lawson overmuch, but he's all right, fur all that. Ther ain't a finer, smarter young feller ranchin' in Montany."

"But th' men!" Steve persisted.

"Oh, them fellers is playin' roots on th' boss while he's gone up t' th' fort, that's all; they're skylarkin', while he thinks they're home tenden' t' biz'ness."

Instructed, but not convinced, Larkin wandered off toward the stable. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he sought the shade of the trees, and strode off up the river toward the fording place where he and Campbell had lately crossed the stream. It was a mile to the ford, but he arrived in time for his purpose, scarcely having time to conceal himself in the bushes before Lawson rode out from among the hills, and, taking the ford, rode straight up the stream toward where his men lay. "I may not be right in follerin' this feller up," the watcher thought, as he strolled slowly back toward the house, "but he don't

act right, and I'm goin' to say nothin,' but lay low, and watch im."

On Monday morning the herd of fat stock was started for Pike's Landing under the charge of experienced cattlemen, and on Tuesday Larkin bade Miss Fiske good-by, with a strange throbbing of the heart, a feeling that was not at all lessened when she gave him her hand in parting and half whispered. "You won't forget?" And out of the fullness of his heart, he answered: "I promise you." He watched the graceful figure out of sight, then turned to take up his duties, wondering vaguely why he felt so sad, so lonesome, so almost homesick.

For young Larkin, the real ranch life now began. It was a life not wholly in keeping with the stories he had heard and read. Human nature, he found, was pretty much the same in Montana as he had known it in New York; there were good men, and there were bad men, as is the case everywhere. There were men who boasted loudly of former doughty deeds and of present physical prowess, who, when put to the test, were sadly lacking in bravery; and other men, quiet and slow to anger, to whom fear was but an idle word. There were but few specimens of the cowboy, as pictured in the minds of the average eastern youth—very few big-mustached, long-haired border ruffians with a revolver at each hip, ready to shoot at the slightest provocation for, although nearly everyone carried a weapon, it was more from force of habit than from necessity, the few shooting affrays being usually the result of some drunken brawl.

Always a ready learner of any labor that required physical exercise, Larkin proved himself an apt pupil in acquiring the duties of his new life. Old Wilson had taken a strong fancy to the young man, and under his competent coaching Steve progressed so rapidly

that, by the time winter had set in, he was deemed capable of going out on the range to care for an out-lying herd.

Upon his return from Chicago, Mr. Kent had called a meeting of all the ranchmen for many miles around to take action against future incursions of cattle thieves. The meeting was held at Rogers's, and Steve, by invitation of his employer, attended it. Since cattle raising had been established in that country, the ranchmen had suffered from the periodical visits of "rustlers," who had so timed their raids and so covered their escape, that all efforts to arrest them had so far proved futile. Heretofore the thieves had confined their exploits to running off small bunches of cattle, invariably selecting the cover of a dark and stormy night. On their last raid they had not confined themselves to cattle stealing alone; they had secured a number of fine horses, and had wantonly murdered and robbed "Dandy Pete" O'Neill, a dashing, handsome fellow, and one of the most popular men in the country. Out on the lonesome range, many miles from human habitation, they had found the young man's corpse lying face downward, where he had tumbled from his saddle with a bullet hole through his heart; everything of value he had been known to have was gone, and to possess his diamond ring, the finger that bore it had been cut off. O'Neill had been dead three days, and his murderers had escaped beyond pursuit with their booty when his body was found.

Grim, determined men they were who met at Rogers's ranch that day; honorable men, who asked only for justice and protection in their rights, and who, now that murder had been done, demanded a life for a life. A visit from the thieves was not anticipated for many months to come, but the ranch-

men determined to prepare for the event whenever it might occur. If stock was stolen from any one of them, common cause was to be made; all were to assist in hunting down the thieves, who were to be given a fair trial on the spot, and if found guilty, hanged without further ceremony. Rogers was named as the leader, all other ranchmen as lieutenants, and all employees as privates in the ranks.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Major Pike sought out Steve. "Here, Larkin," he said, "are two letters and two packages the 'Queen' brought up for you yesterday."

The two letters, a thick, bulky package and a slender, compact one, were thrust into the boy's hands, and he slipped round a convenient corner to examine them. The first was postmarked "Wyncross," and he knew the crabbed, old-fashioned penmanship to be his mother's. Immediately after his arrival at Cotton Run ranch he had written his mother of his whereabouts, and this was his first letter from home. No wonder, then, that his face flushed and grew wonderfully tender as he eagerly devoured this first message from the one who loved him best of all. No matter if the characters were straggling and irregular, no matter if the spelling and composition were far from correct, the mother's heart was in them, and her boy was never a better man than when he stood there with bated breath and moistened eyelids, listening in fancy to her gentle voice. "You are in my mind all the time," she wrote. "Every night I pray that God may be with you always and keep you the good boy you have ever been." Farther on, he read, "Father is middling well, and is working hard." Nothing more, but enough to convince him that his father's feelings toward him had not changed.

He opened the bulky package, and found two pairs

at least one hundred feet in height. A clear spring of excellent water gushed from a cleft in the rocks at the foot of the cliff, and after forming a limpid pool, slipped away down the canyon and disappeared in the soil a mile from its mouth. A more complete shelter from inclement weather nature has seldom presented, and the cowboys took advantage of it nightly by rounding up their cattle in the canyon as in a corral; then, when all was quiet, they went into camp, sleeping soundly on the ground, rolled up in their heavy blankets. One night Mike returned from the ranch where he had gone for provisions, bringing back with him a pack horse heavily laden with necessities, among which were a shovel, a pick, a couple of axes, a sash with four panes of glass, a hammer and some nails, hinges, latches, etc.

"We'll probably nade 'em, me b'y," he said, in answer to Steve's inquiring look. "I've slept, manny's th' toime, wid three fate of snow fur me mattress, but I can't say that I'm sthuck on ut. It's a shack we'll be buildin' at wance."

Next day they began, and in a week's time a snug log shanty stood beneath some low-hanging pines, half in and half out of a gravel bank. It had mud-chinked walls and a rude, but safe fireplace made of stone. They lost no time in moving their stock of utensils and provisions into their new habitation, and then, because Steve insisted upon it, Mike turned to and assisted him to put up another shanty for their horses.

The week slipped by, and midwinter came, with still no snow. In the interval Mike had taken some precautions. From among the stores he produced a large ball of linen twine. Fastening one end of this to a corner of the shack, he spun it out to the stable, and from there carried it to a tree near the spring. Returning to his starting point he carried his twine

from tree to tree down the canyon, out at its mouth and down the little stream to the end of his string. Steve watched him, and understood. "Are we sure to have a blizzard, Mike?" he asked.

"It's not the ixpicted that giner'ly happens, me b'y," was the philosophical answer. "Proof av' th' puddin' isn't iv'ry toime in aitin' th' sthring, but there's nothin' loike th' roight ind av a sthring in an emergincy, as ye moight foind."

CHAPTER XI.

Secluded as they were, Larkin had many a profitable conversation with the shrewd, good-natured Irishman, and the two became very good friends. People who knew him, said that Mike Connally was a dangerously quarrelsome man when inflamed with liquor, but as Mike always sought the gin mills of the river towns for his periodical sprees, and as he was invariably sober when at work, Kent considered him one of the most valuable men in his employ. Of the fact that Connally merited his employer's esteem there was no question, for he was at once one of the most experienced as well as one of the most careful and trustworthy men in the country.

Connally was amused at what he called "the aestern whmsies av Staven." He laughed long and loud when he saw his companion coming in from the hills with a great bundle of hay he had pulled and bound together for bearing, such an act being foreign to his experience.

"F'what's ut fur, Staven?" he asked.

"It's fur our horses, if we should git a big snow-storm," was the reply.

"Dhivil a fear but they'll find their own fade in anny evint," was Mike's laughing reply.

"My horse won't haf' to," said Steve, quickly, "and yours neither, if you'll let me git th' hay."

"G'wan, Staven; fade yer harse th' earth, av ye're so disposed. I'll not interfare," was Mike's concession, and Steve did go on pulling grass, until half a ton lay piled behind the horses in the stable.

It was a mild morning with a leaden sky when Mike started on his next trip to the ranch. He helped Larkin to get the cattle out to their grazing ground, and then, before mounting his horse, cast an anxious eye 'round the horizon, and turned to Steve with something like uneasiness in his voice, "I wudn't let 'em range too fur frum th' shack, Staven," he said. "Ut's a southaist wind, but I don't loike th' luke av ut. Av th' wind sh'u'd turn, an' ut begin snowin' ha-r-d, don't lose anny toime gittin' in. Ivery minnit is goold, thin."

All the forenoon, Larkin rode 'round the outskirts of the herd, keeping the cattle from wandering away. He was sucessful, for the herd was not more than a mile from the canyon when, with a shot from his revolver, he knocked over a rabbit that was hiding under a sage brush close by. He dismounted to secure his game, thinking aloud as he did so:

"Well, this is purty good; it'll make th' sixth rabbit in our but'ry, and they's some pa'tridges besides. I'm mighty well fixed fur Mike's snowstorm, come er not come. Hello!" looking at his watch. "Plumb 12 o'clock. What!"

He jerked out the last word of his soliloquy with surprised force, for a puff of cold air from the northwest fanned his cheek, and a few snowflakes struck his face spitefully at the same time. He looked toward whence came the wind, and saw in the distance the snow coming like a wall of gray, and with the speed of a racehorse. Springing into his saddle, he galloped round the herd, shouting and gesticulating, soon having the satisfaction of seeing the cattle move off in the direction of the canyon. Five minutes later the veil of snow had fallen between the cowboy and his herd of cattle, the latter being to him as if they never were; he could scarcely see a foot before his face, for the density of the icy particles that

bit and stung when they touched his flesh like so many bits of broken glass. The wind was blowing a hurricane, and he was alone on the range in the teeth of a genuine western blizzard. There was no time to stop and think. The canyon lay to the east, and across the track of the storm Larkin started, shuddering as he rode along and thinking of the stories he had heard and read of men freezing to death on the range, on the trail, and, yes, often succumbing to the cold and storm within a few rods of their own doors.

The direction of the wind and the inequalities of the ground were his only guides, and with the descent of each slope he hoped to find the life-saving guide of twine, but all to no purpose. At length he became entirely bewildered, riding sometimes this way, sometimes that, chilled, benumbed and discouraged, when to his ears was borne the sound of the wind sighing through the boughs of a pine. Mechanically he turned toward the sound, drowsily meditating on the probable nearness of his end, when suddenly he was nearly carried from his saddle by an object that crossed his chest; he reached out and grasped it as a drowning man grasps for a straw, then shouted aloud in his joy, for it was the tautly stretched line of twine, and he knew he was saved. Dismounting, he placed his hand on the line and traced it back to the tree, where he found the end. His way was now clear; he had but to turn about and follow the twine, man and horse soon entering the shelter of the canyon, whence the cattle, guided by instinct greater than that of man, had preceded him.

Once within the walls of the snug cabin, he raked up the embers on the hearth, threw on fresh fuel, and soon had the rude little room full of warmth, and dancing shadows, gratefully acknowledging the hand of an all-wise Power in guiding him aright, full of

sympathetic solicitude for those less fortunate. The afternoon waned without a cessation of the storm. Once Larkin made a trip to the spring for water, stopping on his return to feed Gray Don; he laughed aloud when he found the horse so comfortably fixed, exulting with pleased satisfaction at his own thrift and foresight in providing a shelter and forage against this time of need. As he waded through the snow, already knee deep, back to the shack, he stopped to listen to the wind roaring through the tree-tops on the heights above, and realized the terrible cold of the snow-filled air.

Night was coming on with dark awfulness, when to the ears of the lonely watcher in the cabin came the whinny of a horse. He opened the door and saw by the light of his fire the dim outline of a riderless horse, saddled and bridled, standing out there in the storm. Timidity had no place in Larkin's make-up, and he hesitated not at all; the trembling beast was at once led to the vacant stall beside his own, and then, wrapped in Mike's great fur coat, he put his hand on the line and started down the canyon to seek the rider.

CHAPTER XII.

Protected by the steep bluffs of the canyon, Larkin failed to realize the increased fury of the storm until he came to the open, unsheltered country, and found himself floundering through snowdrifts waist deep. The wind smote him so fiercely that he had frequently to gasp for breath, and the icy particles that struck his face were like filings of steel, blown from the bellows of a Titan. His progress was slow, for he must at all hazards retain his hold of the guide line, and as the twine had been elevated to allow cattle to pass under it, the hand that grasped it soon became benumbed with cold. More than once he thought of giving up his self-imposed task in despair; there were a hundred chances to one in favor of failure, his only hope being that the rider had been thrown from his horse by coming into contact with the strong linen twine, in which case he would lie directly in his path. On he blundered until half the stretch of twine was behind him, and was on the point of turning back when he stumbled and fell headlong over some object buried in the snow; the hundredth chance had won. The object of search had been found, but to all intents and purposes the rescued man was a stick or a stone; he was either already dead or far on the way, for although Larkin endeavored by dint of slaps, shakes and kicks to arouse him, his efforts were in vain. Evidently there was but one course to pursue, and Steve acted upon the impulse. He seized the man by the collar,

and grasping the guide line in his left hand, started for the canyon, dragging the unconscious body along.

It was a splendid exhibition of courage and endurance, before which a weaker or less determined man would have quailed. Foot by foot and step by step the rescuer tugged his way along, fully realizing that if this life was still to be saved, there was not a minute to spare. There were times when he really thought he must himself succumb to the cold and snow, but the love of life was strong within him, and here was another life, whose, he knew not, dependent upon him, and the thought gave him strength to go on. It seemed hours to him before he at last staggered into the canyon and stood panting before the door of the shack. A moment's rest, and the senseless burden was deposited before the fireplace. Larkin hesitated not a moment; before seeking even a light, he tore open the man's clothing and placed his hand on his heart; a faint fluttering was felt, and this spurred the rescuer to rapid action; raking up the smoldering embers on the hearth, he threw on some light wood, and by its light looked for the first time on the face of the man he had saved. Steve started up in surprise, for instead of the face being as he half suspected, that of Red Mike, he was gazing on the coarse repulsive features of Lawson's Mexican employee. The man's identity was a surprise, but the rescuer paused not in his work of resuscitation on account of former dislike or prejudice; he applied himself vigorously to his task, and assisted by the genial warmth of the cabin, soon had the satisfaction of seeing the man open his eyes and gaze about him in bewildered amazement. Soon he muttered a few words in Spanish, then spoke in English to Larkin, who was bending over him, "Señor," he whispered, "haf I pass in my check?"

"I reckon not," Steve answered, cheerily; "guess

yeh would've all right, 'f I hedn't found yeh out there in th' snow and yanked yeh in here out o' th' cold. Where'd yeh be'n, anyhow?"

The Mexican avoided Steve's eye. "Me come back a-Fort," he said, presently, and Larkin, though he frequently questioned the man during his stay, could get no further information on the subject. The face, as well as the fingers and toes of the Mexican, were somewhat frostbitten, and to these his host applied such remedies as were at hand. With warmth and plenty of food, these simple efforts soon bore good fruit, although the gloomy, taciturn Mexican was but a poor companion to the lively young fellow who sang away the hours of their confinement, most of his efforts in that line being confined to the two new baritone songs received from Chicago.

About mid-afternoon of the second day the storm abated, the unclouded sun casting its rays upon a world seemingly made of snow. The cattle were about the canyon, none of them having strayed away.

Steve's guest delayed his going until the morning of the third day. The weather had become many degrees warmer, the cattle were again anxious to search for food upon the open range, and their young caretaker was preparing to humor them in their desire, when the Mexican took his leave. "Adios, señor," he said, grasping Larkin's hand, "I mean what you call him, 'good-bye,' you sava ma lif' wan tim', an' me lika you ver' good. Me no furgit, señor." Steve watched the sturdy figure ride out of sight, and turned to his duties with the thought: "I ain't much stuck on that feller; he's welcome to what he hes got, but he kin furgit me jes's soon's he sees fit."

Toward night Connally arrived, his warm Irish heart bubbling over with thankfulness at finding his companion safe. "I didn't loike th' luke av ut," he said, "and I stayed close be th' soide av ould Guy

Kint's karn crib. Yis, I had some anxious tho'ts concernin', ye, Staven, but yer head's level, me b'y, level."

When Steve related the story of bringing in and caring for the Mexican, Mike shook his head as if in doubt, exploiting his quaint philosophy in the following language: "Ye're a good b'y, Staven, an' yer cup's runnin' over wid th' milk av human koindness. I moight, an' I moight not av drug the baste av a greaser haf a moile in th' snow, fur I dawn't loike th' luke av thot crater. F'wat' th' divil he's pokin' his ugly moog round here fur in all sorts av weather, I'm not understandin' at all, but," a peculiar smile flitting over his face, "av iver I ketch him at th' foort when I've a jag aboard, I'll foind out th' intint av 'im er punch th' black schnoot aff him."

The remainder of the winter passed without noteworthy incident. Much snow fell, but there were no more violent storms. A small percentage of the cattle died from want of food, and many of the weaker ones were driven to the shelter of the great home sheds and fed from the stacks, which, by strict economy, were made to last until the returning sun had melted away the snow.

One morning, before the ground was bare, Mr. Kent asked Steve an abrupt question. "Stephen," he said, "kin ye plow?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"S'posed yeh could; so kin I; 't least I ust to, but I'm gittin' 'long too fur to rassle with raw prayrie, now; glad yer here t' do it, Stephen."

"Are yeh thinkin' of breaking up some prayrie, Mr. Kent?"

"Y've hit it, Stephen, fust time yeh throwed yer rope. I'm thinkin' of breakin' some prayrie, and sowin' some of that new-fangled grass th' majer's talkin' 'bout—alfalfy, they call it. I realize I've got

t' do somethin' fur my cattle in time of a pinch, and I guess that grass is all right; that's what th' majer says, anyhow."

Having made up his mind on a subject, it was Kent's habit to act at once. All men who could be spared from the range were put to cutting and hauling cedar posts from the hillsides, and on the first upward trip of the Mountain Queen, a huge pile of barbed wire and some agricultural implements were left on the dock for Guy Kent.

A long gentle slope facing the east was chosen for the alfalfa field, the site having the advantage of being so located that it could be irrigated if necessary. Steve and old MacNabb were given charge of the plowing, which made rapid progress, the plot of thirty acres being all finished in time to get the benefit of the early rains.

Anxious as Larkin was to participate in a "round-up," he was again doomed to disappointment on account of the "farm work," the charge of which developed upon him. Mr. Kent, now that the fever was upon him, decided to fence in, plow and plant a large plot for the raising of vegetables for home use; this done, a great field near the buildings was fenced for the use of the "tame," or dairy cows.

Cotton Run ranch now began to take on the appearance of a great farm. Indeed, the whole vast region began keenly to feel the impetus of advancing civilization. A railroad was being built along the river, fifty miles to northward, and the rather tough young frontier town that had grown up under the wing of Fort Franklin, suddenly grew pretentious and bloomed forth as Franklin City. The great influx of strangers incidental upon the building of a railroad in a few weeks doubled the population, and there was an unprecedented demand for everything eatable and drinkable; as well as for laborers, both

man and beast. More than once, as the months went by, Larkin assisted in driving fat cattle to the markets of the "city," and on different occasions he was detailed, with others, to take down a lot of promising work horses designed for labor on the line. These excursions were not only an agreeable break in the monotony of range life, but they gave to the young easterner a vivid and perhaps necessary insight into some phases of his present existence heretofore known only by hearsay.

On the range Larkin lived a quiet and uneventful life. An acknowledged favorite with all, he took a legitimate advantage of his popularity to become the pupil of every man who was an expert in any line pertaining to their business, practicing with dogged persistency the latest thing in horsemanship, target shooting and lariat throwing, until he was the acknowledged champion of the whole country. "Stirrup Steve," old Wilson nicknamed him one day, after a particularly brilliant feat of horsemanship, and with the cowboy's peculiar liking for alliterative phrases, the name struck a popular chord, and "Stirrup Steve" he remained.

From Helen, Steve heard occasionally, sometimes through her uncle, to whom she wrote every week, and at intervals through the mail, which brought him short, bright letters, full of quaint descriptions of her school life and the world in which she lived. Warm-hearted, womanly letters they were, cordial yet dignified, always with an undertone of friendly interest in his welfare that caused his cheeks to flush, and his pulses to time a quicker stroke. To himself, Larkin freely confessed his love for his employer's niece, and it was with a heart full of painful regrets that he acknowledged the hopelessness of the same. In his imagination she sat like a goddess, pure, exalted, and as far above him as the sun is above the earth; thus

he worshiped from afar. Her letters, too precious to leave his person for one moment, were carried with him wherever he went, to be read and re-read, until every word was burned into his memory. Her face was ever before him, whether in times of activity and excitement or when he lay wrapped in his blanket, alone under the stars, out among the silent hills; then he would confess his love anew, and her parting words would again sound in his ears: "You will not forget?"

He had not forgotten. Under the most trying circumstances, and among men to whom profanity came as natural as the air they breathed, an oath never stained his lips, and his employer, with the astuteness usual to a man of business, soon came to depend much upon him. "Seems your givin' that young feller o' your c'nsid'able rope," Rogers once said to Kent, after Steve had returned from a trip to Franklin City in the interest of the latter.

"Don't git no more rope'n he deserves," was the reply. "Steve's got five things in his favor, which none of th' rest of my men hes got so menny. He's got a hull lot of brains, an' much common sense. They ain't a cowardly hair on him, he's perfec'ly honest, an' he don't drink a drop."

Among the men on the ranch, Larkin was universally liked and respected; there was no jealousy because of Kent's confidence in him. Red Mike voicing the sentiments of them all when he remarked: "Spakin' of harses, it's quoite sildom thot yet gits a perfect wan. A fasht walker don't be always an aisy looper; sometoimes ye gits an aisy looper, an' wan that's gintle, an' he'll ait th' nick aff ye or kick ye into th' blissed kingdom afore ye know ye're did; av he's sound in wind, he's ap' t' be sphavened; av his wind is roight, luke out fur ringbones or quarter cracks. I hed a harse, wan toime, how-

iver, thot had but wan fault; in that partic'lar he was just loike our frind, Staven."

"An' what was his fault, Mike?" asked one of his auditors.

"He were young," said Mike, with a droll wink.

It was with a feeling of the most bitter disappointment that Steve learned of Helen's decision to spend her summer vacation with a schoolmate in the east, and gall was added to his bitterness on learning, by the same letter, that she had lately received a call from Lawson. To the disconsolate young lover the latter intelligence was worst of all. Many an hour he had spent in thinking of the long summer she would spend at home, where he could see her daily and listen to the sound of her voice. There would be music, and he would sometimes be asked to sing with her, and—he always acknowledged it with a touch of shame at his presumption—he could love her all he pleased without anyone beside himself being the wiser. Well, that dream was all over now; he had lived and could continue to live without a daily sight of her. But the mere knowledge that she had received his enemy on at least a friendly footing filled him with grave apprehensions that were not unmingled with that very human trait, jealousy. Plan after plan he turned over in his mind for warning the girl against receiving the advances of Lawson, always to arrive at the same impotent decision:

"What right hev I to interfere, anyhow? Because I don't like Lawson don't make him a rascal, though I'm purty sure he is one. More than my suspicions, I can't fetch a charge agin him, and I guess I'd be a fool to try, jes' yet, at any rate."

In the meantime he received periodical letters from home, such letters as only a mother can write

to a son, and to these he replied, telling her of his whole life, suppressing only his one sweet secret.

The summer was one of prosperity for the owner of Cotton Run ranch. The rains had fallen more copiously than usual, and the live stock were correspondingly fat and frisky. The opening of a home market had brought many an extra dollar to the owner's purse, and so far, the growing of cultivated grass for fodder without irrigation was a pronounced success. The alfalfa was well advanced toward a second cutting, and the time for the fall round-up drawing near when Mr. Kent started Larkin and Bill Wilson for Franklin City with a dozen fat cattle for a local butcher.

"Here's an order fur McPherson t' pay you," the ranchman said to Steve. "Keep ol' Bill sober if yeh kin, and, say! th' round-up's 'bout due, and Red's off on a spree. They ain't a better cutter-out in th' kentry than Mike, and we'll need him bad. Look eround among t' gin mills down t' th' city and ef yeh kin find him, fetch 'im back with yeh; ye're th' only man on th' ranch kin do ennything with 'im when he's drunk."

CHAPTER XIII.

It was nearing night of the third day from home when Larkin and Wilson reached McPherson's slaughter house, and left the cattle they had brought. Owing to the crowded condition of the town, they found accommodations for themselves and their horses with the butcher, and after a meal started out for a stroll. If they had come on purpose for sight seeing they could not have struck the town at a better time. It was Saturday, and those who labored on the new railroad had that morning received their pay for the month. "Pay day" on a new railroad in any section of the country is sure to be followed by scenes of drunkenness and debauchery, but in this far western town, with its already mixed population, men took much greater license, and the scene can scarcely be described.

On the outskirts of the town large shanties had been erected for the accommodation of the Italian laborers. In front of these barrels of beer were on tap, and around them the swarthy, light-hearted sons of southern Europe gathered to enjoy themselves in their own way. Groups of surveyors, contractors, clerks and foremen stood on the street corners or sat on the verandas of the hotels. The streets were full of ranchmen, cowboys, stone-cutters, bridge builders, carpenters, blacksmiths, teamsters, laborers, gamblers and the general riffraff that invariably appears where great public improvements are being made. The many saloons were crowded

with men in all stages of intoxication, drinking, cursing, singing, dancing, arguing, quarrelling and fighting, the air in front of their open doors reeking with blasphemy and obscenity, such as the most hardened seldom experience. In front of one of these hells, Wilson halted. "Le's go in an' hev a swaller," he said.

Larkin turned and gazed earnestly into his companion's face. "Bill," he said, "are yeh sick? If yeh are, we'll find a doctor. If you or me is dry, we kin git as good a drink as we're ust to on th' range, and that's good enough fur anyone. You know we've got biz'ness to 'tend to, and we must keep our heads clear. We've got to find Mike, git him sobered up, and take him home with us. Th' boss sent us two, 'cause he thought he c'd trust us. Now, be we goin' to show him that we ain't t' be trusted?"

Wilson winced. "A glass o' licker won't hurt nubbuddy—" he began, but Steve interrupted him. "It's the first glass that always raises Cain with a man," he said. "None of th' rest of 'em won't hurt him, if he don't take the first one. Bill, promise me that yeh won't take the first one while we're in town."

If there was anything on which Wilson prided himself, it was his word. "Once given, never broken," he bragged. And now Steve worked hard for a promise. At last it came, with a hearty handclasp. "I won't drink a drop of nothin' strong while we're in th' city, Stephen."

"Spoke out like a man!" cried Steve. "Now tell me where Mike gener'ly hangs out when he comes to town, and we'll begin to look fur him right away."

"Mike don't hev no p'ticlar hangin'-out place's I know of," Wilson answered; "we'll jes' haf t' keep on a-huntin' till we find him."

They entered the saloon near them, and elbowed their way to the bar. Yes, the barkeeper knew Red Mike; he had been there the day before, was drunk and "scrappy," and had been "fired." Several other resorts were visited with like results; Mike had "been there," but nobody had seen him that day.

"Let's go down t' Sinny's place," Wilson suggested at last; "if Mike ain't nowheres else, he's sure to be to Sinny's."

Larkin admitted the logic of the remark, but asked, "Where's Sinny's?"

"Jes' down here a piece, by th' river. Sinny's a bad man himself, an' he keeps th' toughest j'int in town. We're li'ble t' run up ag'in all sorts o' things down there."

"We can't help what we run up ag'inst," cried Larkin, impatiently. "We've got to find Mike. Lead off."

Wilson had well described "Sinny's" as the worst place in town. The proprietor himself, a gambler and desperado, with a long record of crime behind him, was the champion and proprietor of those of his ilk, and a man not a little feared by the better element of the town. His place was more than an ordinary saloon. Besides the bar, there was a large room arranged for gambling, and a dance hall. All the departments were running "wide open" when the two searchers entered the famous resort, coming directly from the street into the general room, at one end of which was the bar. To their left, through a wide arch, they could see the tables where gambling was going on, and to their ears was borne the sound of music and tinkling laughter from the dance hall. The smoky, illy-lighted barroom was full of men, and leaning against the bar, two drunken fellows were abusing each other, and talking "fight."

"I kin ait ye in a howly minnut, ye sphawn av ould John Bull," boasted Red Mike, for one of the men was he.

"G'wan, ye red-necked Mick!" shouted the other man, who was no other than Lawson's man, Sampson. "I kin lick hany Irishman hever walked."

"Go it!" yelled the delighted crowd. "Hit him, Bull!" "Give it to him, Mick!" etc.

Steve pushed his way to Connally's side and touched his arm. "Come with me, Mike," he said.

Larkin's mildly expressed command had scarcely the effect he had hoped for. Connally was delighted to see the face of a friend, and it fired his ambition to perform great deeds. "Staven," he cried with drunken gravity, "I'd go wid yez t' th' ind av th' airth, but before we goes I has a juty to perform. I promised to poonch th' schnoot aff this moonkey-faced Bull, an' I musht kape me wo-r-r-d."

"Well, you ain't goin' to fight, I tell yeh; you're jes' comin' 'long o' me," and Steve grasped him by the collar and dragged him toward the door.

"Lave me at him, lave me at him!" shouted Mike, struggling to break away.

"There won't be any fight to-night," was the firm reply. "Come along." A man burst through the crowd and faced Larkin. It was Lawson, and his evil face bore a peculiarly triumphant expression. "Who says they can't fight, if they want to? Who'll stop them!" he roared.

The stalwart young man by the bar released his hold of Mike's collar, and receded one pace. "I say they can't fight, and I will stop 'em if they try it!" he said, defiantly.

"Oh, you will, eh! Well, we'll see if you will. Sampson, if you feel like putting it onto this fellow, go for him; I'll see you through."

Thus encouraged, the Englishman made a blind

lunge for his late antagonist, only to be caught by the neck and flung, with a scarcely apparent effort, into a corner, where he remained. Steve turned to Lawson, with a face white as ivory, yet with a smile on his twitching lips.

"They ain't a-goin' to be any fight, Mr. Lawson," he said, "unless you and me hev it. Yeh said onc't, that you'd git even with me, and mebbe this is as good a time as you'll ever git. Yeh seem mighty anxious fur a fight, which I don't want 't all, but if we've got t' even up sometime, why not now? Put yer gun on th' bar there, and I'll put mine there, too. Then strip yerself, and I'll accommodate yeh."

Lawson hesitated, and a murmur went up from the crowd. Sinny leaned over the bar and observed:

"Gen'lemen, they ain't no biz'ness goin' on while you've got th' floor. Ef they's goin' ter be a scrap, let's hev it!" Addressing himself to Lawson, "Say, mister, you put yer yap inter this thing, an' y've got a fair offer. Be yeh goin' t' fight or not?"

"I'm not a pugilist," Lawson growled, his shifty eyes surveying the mocking faces about him, "but I'll fight him in the morning at ten or twenty yards."

"No yer won't," blustered Sinny. "We're a law abidin' community, we are, an' ther ain't a-goin' to be no shootin', d'ye mind."

"May th' Lord hev mercy on your poor soul ef they is," groaned a lugubrious voice back in the crowd. "Fur yeh don't know what yer up ag'in'st."

"Seen 'im put a .32 pill through a watch ring at five paces lots o' times," drawled Wilson, who had hitherto kept silence.

"Takes a — good man ter do that," cried Sinny, slapping the bar.

Lawson had evidently abandoned all pretenses to belligerency and was seeking some way of escape from an unpleasant situation, when Red Mike,

roused from his stupor, spat on his hands and capped the climax. "Staven," he asked earnestly, "shell I ait him?"

The crowd roared, and Larkin's face relaxed into a broad grin. "Yeh needn't mind, Mike," he laughed. "They's better grub than him."

The incident was closed, and the men began to move about once more. Lawson and his man slipped away unmolested and unobserved, whither nobody knew or cared. Out of the corner came the owner of the lugubrious voice, in the person of Dave Campbell.

"Gen'lemen," he cried, addressing everybody in general, "this fellar is Steve Larkin, better known as 'Stirrup Steve.' He's the darin'est rider, th' best shot and th' cleanest, best feller in southern Montana. He's jes' showed yeh that he's all right."

"He's all right," echoed the "gentlemen," and soon soon after the two friends left the place together with Wilson and the now willing Mike.

Out in the street Campbell spoke. "I didn't expect t' see you, Steve, when I moseyed inter that j'int."

"Yeh wouldn't, neither," was the response, "ef I hedn't hed biz'ness there. What was you doin' there?"

"Come down t' fetch some cattle. Hedn't ennything else t' do; went in out o' pure cussedness, I reckon." Then, after a moment's silence, "Yeh don't hev very good luck gettin' back at that feller, Steve."

"Three times and out," Larkin quoted, grimly. "Twic't I've give him a chans't to git any old thing he might want o' me, but he don't seem t' come my way. Mebbe th' third time and out, will be diff'rent."

They wove in and out among the groups on the walk until they reached a quiet corner, where their

ways parted. Campbell's voice was strangely grave when he grasped his friend's hand. "Steve," he said, "I somehow dread the third time you git up ag'inst Lawson. He ain't got th' sand t' give yeh a square deal, but he's th' right sort t' plug ye in th' dark from th' biz'ness end of a gun. Look out fur th' man frum Mizpah river way."

Larkin laughed carelessly. "Mebbe," he said. "I've no doubt he's capable of it, but 'tain't goin' t' come just yet. He's got too much at stake fur a while."

CHAPTER XIV.

The days following Larkin's adventure at Franklin City were busy ones. The time for the fall round-up had come, and the whole country was alive with preparation for the important event. A broad plain surrounded by hills had been chosen for the rendezvous, and toward this center the employees of the different ranchmen were slowly urging every hoof that could be found in the wide country in the shape of a cow, calf, bull or steer. When all arrangements were completed and the great final day came, the big mess wagons were drawn to the scene, temporary shelters were erected and fires were built for cooking, and anon heating the branding irons. Ranchmen hobnobbed with each other in earnest discussion of matters peculiar to their interests, and picturesquely-attired, wide-hatted cowboys galloped hither and thither on the outskirts of the great herd, holding it together for the final test. Morning, noon and night, there was an appetizing smell of boiling coffee and frying bacon on the crisp, dry air, to be succeeded later by the odor of burning hair and scorching flesh, as the red-hot iron was applied to bawling, struggling, frightened animals.

Here the real science of herding was in evidence. It is one thing to take charge of a herd of cattle moving quietly over the country, another to ride boldly into a roaring, seething, pitching mass of the same, and skillfully avoiding contact with a hundred living obstacles, cut out and separate from all others

some half-maddened brute, to be safely landed a minute or two later into a compact herd of its own brand and kind, or, if yet unbranded, whether calf, yearling or full-grown animal, to throw the rope with unerring hand around neck or leg, and with a quick turn of the trained horse, drag the struggling animal to the branders, busy at their fire.

There were three days of it—three days in which the apt and supple Larkin made the most of his opportunity at the science of roping and cutting out, to the satisfaction of himself and the admiration of his many friends. Three days of hustling hard work, danger and excitement, during which time there were many leisure hours devoted to games, trick riding and target shooting. Then the round-up was over. Many mavericks, or unbranded cattle, had been turned in by the different men, and as these are regarded by the cowboys in the light of prizes, when the strangers were divided among the various proprietors, and the prize money paid in, Steve found himself possessed of an extra forty dollars.

"Where'd th' mavericks git their funny name?" he asked of his employer, as they rode homeward at the heels of a herd of fat steers bearing the monogram of a G and a K curiously blended.

Kent looked at his questioner with keen satisfaction. "I'm glad to find yeh seeking information, Stephen," he said. "They's a cause fur ev'ry reason, and ev'ry reason has a cause. If men hedn't be'n always lookin' fur reasons, they'd never found a cause fur nothin'. But about the name of 'maverick.' Jes' before th' civil war broke out, there was a feller down in Texas named Stephen Maverick. He owned a tidy bunch of cattle, and ther come a time when th' feed on his range, down on the gulf coast, got middlin' short. They was an island lyin' out there in the water. They was good grass and fresh

water there, and they was a good menny hundred acres of it, too. Nobuddy wasn't doin' nothin' with th' island, and this here Maverick struck a new idee. He boated a good menny hundred head o' cattle over there, and left 'em.

"Waal, th' war come on, and Maverick moved to New Erleans, leavin' his cattle to increase and multiply, which they done right along, not bein' disturbed, fur men hed somethin' else to think about, them days. Bimeby, when th' war was over, they got so menny head there 't th' island couldn't support 'em enny more, and as their owner didn't come near 'em, some fellers found out that there was a place where they c'd be drove ashore at low tide, and they went and drove over some fifty thousan' of 'em. Course they wa'n't no brand on none of 'em, and as they scattered over the country, folks got in th' habit of callin' 'em 'Maverick's cattle,' which was soon shortened to 'maverick,' meanin' any unbranded animal. See."

Larkin "saw," and said so, further discussion of the subject being interrupted by a retrograde movement on the part of some of the cattle. Kent made a quick, sidewise movement to head them off, and in so doing was pitched heavily to the ground, a broken collar bone being the result. He made light of his fall, insisting that he was not hurt, but nevertheless sent that evening for his young employee to come to his room. The tough old ranchman was evidently in pain, and his manner betrayed the effort it cost him to acknowledge the fact.

"Stephen," he said, "I'm quite a little shuk up, I guess. I don't s'pose I'd ort t' mind it, I, that hes be'n in so menny scrapes. Why, I've be'n through ev'rything, 'cept bein' struck by lightnin', an' bein' run through a sassage cutter; but I guess they ain't no use of denyin' th' fact that I'd ort t' hev a doctor,

Saddle up early's yer min' to in th' mornin', and go to th' city fur one. While yer there, jes' step in th' telegraft office and send a dispatch to Ammer & Co., Shecawgo. Tell 'em I've got five carload of prime steers ready fur shipment, and ask them what they'll give fur 'em. If they'll pay four an' a half, er better, I'll ship 'em next week by rail, fur I understand they're shippin' from Mamsleys Bluff a'ready. You must wait fur an answer, but send along th' doctor, right away."

When the sun rose next morning, Larkin was already ten miles on his way, and at 4 o'clock p. m. he had put the whole fifty miles behind him, and was dismounting at the doctor's office in Franklin City. The doctor was at home, and he started at once for Cotton Run ranch.

At the telegraph office Larkin waited for an answer to the message he had signed "Guy Kent." It came in an hour and the youth read it with satisfaction, for it ran, "Ship stock at once. If prime, will pay 47/8. Ammer & Co."

Twenty-four hours later, Larkin, Bill Wilson, Red Mike and Matt Toby were called into the room where their employer, swathed in bandages, sat in a great chair.

"Boys," he said, "th' doctor 'lows I've got t' stay here fur quite a spell; fur all that, biz'ness hes got t' go right on jes' th' same. Th' market's hot now, and we must hit it 'fore it cools. Bill, you and Mike and Matt git yer flittin' ready, and in th' mornin' help Stephen with them steers down t' Mamsleys Bluff, fur I'm goin' t' ship 'em by rail all th' way. It's a hundred mile down there, and yer kin make it in 'bout four days, I reckon; yeh kin go now," waving them a dismissal with his well arm, then turning to Steve, as the others left the room, "Stay here, Steve, I've summat t' say to yeh."

The door closed behind the men, and Larkin turned an inquiring face toward his employer, who, with eyes bent on the floor, seemed to be in a deep study. Presently he raised his head. "Stephen," he asked, "how old air yeh now?"

"In my twentieth year," was the slow response, for Steve had but recently passed his nineteenth birthday.

"Well, yeh look twenty-five, with thet'r long mustach' o' yourn," said Kent, with a gleeful chuckle, as the young man's hand involuntarily sought the really handsome growth on his upper lip. "Never mind th' mustach' now, fur it don't cut an awful lot o' figger in what I'm a-goin' t' say. I've tried yeh in a good many ways sence yeh come here, and I never found yeh wantin'. Now, I'm goin' t' send yeh away on a commission th' like of which I hev never sent no-buddy on, fur up to now I've always went myself. I'm knocked out, fur th' present, and you're the only man I kin depend on t' take my place. Git yer flit-tin' t'gether, and go with th' rest of 'em to th' Bluff with them cattle. When they're loaded, git on th' cars and take 'em t' Shecawgo. See that they're well cared fur on th' trip, and when yeh git there, stay by 'em till ev'ry one of 'em is unloaded and weighed. Don't let them Shecawgo fellers beat yeh down enny on th' price, and all yeh git over $4\frac{7}{8}$ is yor'n. You'll take th' check they give yeh, and deposit it fur me in th' Packers' National Bank, where we was when you come. You'll need some cash to pay freight and expenses, so if you'll jes' pull open th' right-han' drawer of my desk there, and git me that'r tin box, I'll be obleeged t' yeh."

Larkin did as he was bid, the opening of the box displaying a quantity of money in gold and bank bills. Kent lifted some of the bills and let them drop back into the box.

"I can't count very good with one hand," he said, disgustedly. "Stephen, sort out \$500 here. It'll take about half o' that fur th' freight, and yeh'll need a hundred fur yerself. Th' rest of it I want yeh t' take t' Helen. She must be 'bout out o' pin money 'gin this."

Up to this Larkin had listened without a word. His was a strong character, and he had no doubt of his ability to carry out his employer's directions to the letter. But when came the realization that he was actually to visit his loved one, to look once more into her eyes and to hear her sweet voice, he flushed like a guilty schoolboy, while his heart beat a riotous tattoo in his bosom.

"Ain't yer trustin' me too fur, Mr. Kent?" he managed to stammer out.

"Nope," was the decided answer. "Guess I know my biz'ness. Count out that 'r' five hundred, and git t' bed; yeh'll need an early start. One thing I furgot t' caution yeh on—don't go up t' see Helen till yer all through to th' stock yards, and yeh'd better tog up a little fore yeh go, fur they're purty high steppers there to Madam Montour's boardin' school."

Larkin arose to leave the room. "I'm obliged to yeh, Mr. Kent," he said, grasping the ranchman's hand, "fur puttin' so much confidence in me, and I'll do my best to please yeh."

"Yeh don't haf t' tell me that, Stephen!" the old man cried. "I know that a'ready; but as ev'rybuddy don't know yeh 's well 's I do, mebbe I'd better give yeh some credentials."

He rose, went to the desk and wrote for a moment, handing Steve a piece of paper when he had finished. "There, Stephen," he said, "I guess that'll carry yeh through. Most th' dealers in Shecawgo know my fist; read it."

On the paper Kent had written: "To ennybody

that may be concerned: This is to certify that the b'arer, a tall young feller named Stephen Larkin, is my own app'inted agent. What he says goes.—Guy Kent."

Larkin viewed the old-fashioned chirography with curious interest, then folded the paper and put it into his pocket. "That ought to go anywheres," he said.

"Anywheres 'twixt here and Shecawgo," repeated Guy Kent. "Good-by, and good luck to yeh, Stephen."

It is unnecessary to follow Larkin and his companions on their long drive to the shipping point. On the evening of the fifth day from home, the cattle were all loaded and Larkin waved the three cowboys a farewell from the rear platform of the train that was to carry himself and his charges to Chicago.

Five days of bumping and jolting over the lonesome prairies of Montana and northern Dakota, the wheat stubble and corn fields of Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois, during which the cattle had been watered and fed once, brought a very tired and dirty young man to the great stockyards of Chicago. It was a little after daybreak when his five cars were shifted to the runways, but he thought not of himself until his cattle were cared for; then a bath, a shave and a hearty breakfast, and Larkin was back in the busy turmoil of the yards, keenly alive to the importance of his position, and eager to merit the good opinion and confidence of his employer.

He paid his freight bill, and next sought the office of Ammer & Co. A spruce clerk sat at a desk near the door, and to him Steve addressed himself. "I've got eighty-five head of fat steers in yard 72," he said.

The clerk raised his eyes and complacently viewed the stalwart figure before him. "I can't help it," he said, and turned to his writing.

The humor of the situation struck Larkin, and he laughed aloud. "I know that," he said, good-naturedly, "but I want to sell the stock, and would like to know who to see about it."

The man of the pen unbent. "Mr. Dalton is our buyer," he answered. "He is out in the yards somewhere, at present—I can't tell you just where; but as everybody knows him, you will probably have no difficulty in finding him."

Larkin left the office and made his way toward the yard where his stock had been left. There were cattle to right of him, cattle to left of him, cattle all 'round him. Here a yard of long-horned, thin-quartered "Modocs" from Texas gazed in wild-eyed wonder through the bars of their prison, there a herd of stall-fed Illinois Shorthorns lay quietly chewing the cud; these were succeeded by sleek "doddies" from Iowa and Nebraska, Herefords from Kansas, and many like those he had brought, hardy, well-grown grades of the best known beef breeds.

He took account of them all as he moved slowly along, pausing at intervals to inquire for Mr. Dalton. Once he stopped suddenly as if he had received a blow. Drawing in his breath, in perplexed wonder and surprise, he gazed with interest at a group of grade steers in a yard, then a movement of the cattle obscuring his view, asked no lief, but vaulting over the high fence, critically examined two or three individuals of the herd.

one of the most aristocratic and exclusive institutions in the city by the lake. Contrary to established usage governing similar institutions, the pupils were allowed a great degree of liberty out of study hours. Trusting entirely to their honor and discretion, they came and went at their pleasure; thus it was merely coincident that Miss Helen Fiske and three comrades were out for a stroll on the very afternoon that young Larkin started out to find the Montour school and deliver Guy Kent's commission to his niece.

The girls had nearly finished their outing and were homeward bound, when their attention was called to a knot of people standing about an overloaded truck in the middle of the street. It was only a commonplace incident, such as is daily witnessed in the streets of every large city. But as boarding school young ladies are but human creatures, after all, the fair quartet stopped at a safe distance to observe the trend of events. Up a sharp declivity the miserable horses had drawn their great load, until they could go no farther; that was all. And their driver, a great hulking brute, was urging by oath and lash the exhausted animals to further and greater effort. Time after time, under the shower of blows and curses, the patient beasts put their utmost strength to their vain task, and one of them had fallen to the pavement when a tall, well-dressed young man, wearing a broad-brimmed felt hat, pushed his way through the crowd.

"Stop lickin' them horses!" he cried to the driver. That individual paused long enough to consign the tall young man to a more than equatorial climate, and proceeded with the castigation.

"Stop!" the stranger shouted. "If yeh strike one more blow, I'll break yer neck."

One more blow was struck, as if in defiance, then the left hand of the tall young man grasped the driv-

er's collar. With his right, he wrested away the whip, and the spectators were treated, amid the groans, howls and curses of the victim, to an extremely lively exhibition of a man taking his own medicine. A policeman rushed up and demanded, "What's the row, here?"

A dozen voices offered to explain, but the officer addressed his inquiries to the man with the whip. "Well," said the latter, still holding the writhing driver by the neck, "this feller's horses had done all they could, and they couldn't do no more; one of 'em was down when I got here, and he was a'lickin' 'em. I told him to stop, which he didn't, so I took his gad and licked him; that's all."

"That's right," cried several of the bystanders.

"What's yer name, young feller?" the officer asked the protector of dumb brutes.

"Stephen Larkin, of Cotton Run ranch, Montana," was the prompt answer.

The officer touched his helmet. "Mr. Larkin," he said, "will you appear ag'inst this feller at the — street police station, to-morrow at ten?"

"I'll be there," responded the tall young man, turning and striding away, and with the arrest of the driver and his team, the street incident closed, except for the group of young ladies on the sidewalk.

"Wasn't he grand!" gasped Alice Edgworth, addressing the whole group.

"Do you know him, Helen?" asked the calmly observant Mary Manning. "Seems to me he said he was from some place in Montana, and I am not quite sure but what he mentioned your home as that place."

Miss Fiske turned an animated face toward her companions. "Yes," she answered, with a little more dignity than was strictly necessary, "I know the

young man; he is one of my uncle's employees. I wonder what brings him to Chicago."

"Perhaps you'd better run along home, Helen," suggested Miss Edgworth. "I think you are going to have a caller."

At the door, the servant said, "Miss Fiske, there is a gentleman in the parlor, waiting for you."

"Tell him I will see him in a few minutes," was the calm reply.

She ran to her room with a light step, vaguely conscious of a new feeling of joy and exhilaration. Vainly she strove to analyze the pleasant sensation, saying to herself as she selected her prettiest toilet in which to welcome her visitor:

"I suppose it's because he is from home that makes me so glad he came; he will give me news from uncle and all the rest of them, and—well, it *was* grand of him to take the part of those poor horses. How strong and handsome he looked!" She paused for a moment in the midst of her preparations, a look of strange wistfulness coming into her face. "I wish," she said aloud, "that I had not heard that story about him; it would be different if I knew the truth. Knowing that, it would be easy to treat him as he deserves. Really, I should have had an answer from Wilson, before this. Heigho!" rapidly resuming her toilet, "and all this for one of my uncle's cattlemen, why, *Hel-en Fiske!*"

When, at last, she took a parting glance into her mirror, it was not an unhappy face she saw reflected there, albeit a trifle rosy, rendering unnecessary an assumption of calm dignity ere she descended to greet her visitor.

Larkin sat in the parlor on the edge of an elegantly upholstered chair, holding his wide hat on his knees. The big, athletic cowboy, brave to rashness when came the tests of danger or endurance, bold as a lion

in all his dealings with men, now sat trembling in his boots in anticipation of an interview with a girl.

She came straight to where he had risen from his chair, extending to him a cool, white hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Larkin?" she said. "When did you reach Chicago?"

He took his cue from her indifferent manner, and answered in kind. "I got here yest'dy morning. Leastwise, I got to th' stock yards then. I brought in some stock fur Mr. Kent."

She motioned him to be seated, and herself took a chair opposite. "Then my uncle is not with you?" she resumed.

The young man studied the figures of the carpet. "No," he said, after a moment's pause. "He didn't think it was ne'ssary fur us both t' come, so he sent me."

Helen gave him a glance full of concern. "You speak strangely, Mr. Larkin," she said. "When did it become necessary for more than one to come to market with cattle? Uncle has never, until this time at least, employed anyone to attend to his business, especially the disposal of marketable stock after the fall round-up. I must confess that I cannot understand why he should do so at this time. Is he ill?"

Larkin shrank instinctively from informing Helen of her uncle's accident, and he proceeded with caution. "Mr. Kent is not sick," he said, "but they's a good deal to be looked after to home, so he sent me."

Her uneasiness was allayed, and she turned to him with the question, "Were you successful in transacting your business?"

"I've got along fairly well," he replied. "I'm all through now except givin' you this." He laid a plump roll of bills into her hand with the remark,

"Your uncle sent it to you; he said you'd be needin' some pin money."

She let the money lie in her lap, touching it caressingly with her finger tips.

"Dear old uncle," she murmured, "how good you are! How can I ever repay you!" Then, looking up suddenly, "Mr. Larkin, please tell me about dear uncle; and home, and—everybody there."

For an hour Steve held forth on subjects of interest connected with life on the home ranch and its vicinity, then, when he felt that his subject was exhausted made a move as if to go, but Miss Fiske held him with a gesture.

"Tell me something of yourself," she entreated. "What have you been doing for the past year?"

He flushed with pleasure, happy that she took an interest in his welfare. "Ther' ain't much to tell about myself," he hastened to say. "I've learnt t' herd cattle middlin' well, t' cut out and rope 'bout 's good's any of 'em, kin hit a mark 'most ev'ry time I shoot, and ride some better'n I ust to. I guess that's 'bout all."

A maid came in and lit the gas. "A letter for you, Miss Fiske," she said, handing Helen a common-looking envelope, and leaving the room at once. Miss Fiske held her letter to the light, uttering an involuntary exclamation of surprise when she observed the address and the postmark.

"Excuse me, please," she said, hurriedly. "No, don't go yet. I have something more to say to you."

He sat in silence while she hurriedly scanned her letter, wondering greatly when she turned to him with a drawn face and eyes filled with tears.

"Read this," she said, with a sob in her voice, "and learn how mean I am, and how cruelly I have misjudged you."

Wonderingly, Larkin received the letter from



Helen's hands, and turned to the light to read it. "Franklin City" the postmark on the envelope read, and his wonder and interest increased as he perused the following lines:

"Cotton Run ranch, Oct. —th 18—. deer Missy, your leter come hear while we was on the round up and i diddunt git it rite Off. i gess you hev seen that ornary scunk lauson lately, wich i wood cus him If i want ritin to you. Steave went in sinneys that nite to look fur red mike that was on a Drunk wun weak. i was with steave an was sobber fur he diddunt want me to drink none. Lauson was haf full an poaked his horn in steaves Bizness of gittin mike out an was sassy. Steave ofered to wipe the erth with lauson wich he diddunt hev no sand to fite, ner nothin' but sneaked out. Steave dont cus nun ner he don't drink nothin strongern watter. we air al purty smart, yere old friend William wilson."

Helen had risen, evidently to hide her embarrassment, and stood looking out into the street. At the slight rustling caused by refolding the letter, she turned to meet Larkin's inquiring eyes.

"Don't you understand?" she broke out, impetuously. "Mr. Lawson called to see me some little time ago, a month, perhaps. He said he had come straight from Franklin City, where he had been on business. He seemed to take great interest in you, on account of your youth and inexperience. He said he was sorry to find that you were becoming dissipated, for your own sake, as well as mine, for he knew that I took an interest in your welfare. It gave him great pain to tell me what he knew, but he considered it his duty, that I might not be further deceived in you. It had been necessary for him to take one of his employees with him, and the man, being addicted to drink, had eluded him. Going into a notorious resort in search of this person, he there

found you and Wilson and Red Mike, all intoxicated, and brutally beating the man he was seeking. He interfered to save the man, and you all assaulted him, the only way he saved himself being through drawing his revolver and holding you at bay until he escaped. He also said that you threatened to shoot him on sight whenever or wherever you might meet him. I was grieved and disappointed," she went on, "and—and, then, instead of writing to you, as I should have done, I wrote to Mr. Wilson, who, next to uncle, has been my best friend. I asked him to tell me the truth of the matter, and this is his answer."

She raised her eyes to his, and they were dimmed with tears. "Can you forgive me?" she asked.

"Sit down, Miss Helen," he said, gently. "I don't think there's much to forgive. Bill has told all there is to tell, and told it right, so you don't need any more from me. Lawson seems to hev it in fur me, and to tell the truth, they ain't much love lost. You know him now, better'n you ever did. It's none of my biz'-ness, but do yeh think he's much of a man?"

Her lip curled in scorn. "I have no feeling for him except that of contempt," she said, coldly. "I will never speak to him again except to tell him that."

"I wish you wouldn't say that," he pleaded. "I mean, that you wouldn't speak to Lawson ag'in. I've got some good reasons fur askin' yeh not t' break with him yet, I think I know some things that ev'rybody don't know and by your help I c'n git more."

She nodded appreciatively, but turned toward him an inquiring face.

"You will pardon me," she said, "but I scarcely understand; what do you wish me to do?"

Honest Larkin went straight to the point.

"I know I'm askin' a good deal of you," he said,

with earnest conviction in his voice, "it may be that I am 'way off in my calculations, but I don't think I am, and I need your help to carry my points to a finish. Please don't think this is a pleasant thing for me to ask of you, fur I realize jes' all about it. If I'm right in my the'ry, enny help you may give toward attainin' results will be appreciated by them interested; if I am mistaken, I won't be th' first one, and ev'ryone will 'low in enny event that I hedn't an axe to grind fur myself. Now, I'm goin' t' tell you all I know fur *certain*, all I *think* I know, and what I hope, with your help, to find out; when I'm through tellin' it, please give me your thoughts on the subject." He dropped his voice to a low, confidential tone, holding forth so interestingly that the girl scarcely moved or spoke until at the end of an hour he ceased to speak and looked inquiringly into her eyes.

Miss Fiske met her companion's searching gaze unflinchingly. "You certainly have made a plausible case," she said, "and I believe you are on the right track. The position you have assigned me in working out the details carries with it more or less of humiliation, but the end you hope to attain justifies the means. I am a true daughter of the range, and I would be false indeed, to all I hold dear, did I shrink from doing my duty at this time. You may depend on me, Mr. Larkin, to assist you in every way that lies in my power."

Larkin rose and took his hat.

"I must be goin' now," he said, "good-bye, Miss Helen." He extended his hand in farewell, and Helen laid hers into it, raising her eyes the while to meet his earnest gaze, only to let them drop to the floor while a warm wave of color swept over her neck and cheek, and Larkin, unsophisticated, natural Larkin, bent and kissed her hand as he would have

kissed the hand of a goddess, and kissed it unrebuked. "Good-bye," he said again, in a strange, thick voice, and went away.

Later, when the tinkling tea bell had sent forth its daily summons through the great house, Mary Manning, her dearest friend, sought and found Helen there, found, and saw, and comprehended. "Tea is ready, Helen, dear," this astute maiden announced, "but perhaps you would as lief have it served in your room; your eyes are too bright, and your cheeks far too rosy to escape observation in the dining-room." And without a word, Helen suffered herself to be led away.

The next morning, his business transacted, even to appearing at police court, where he witnessed a highly disgusted driver pay a fine of \$10 for the privilege of abusing his horses, Larkin shook the dust of Chicago from his feet. It was with pardonable pride and satisfaction that he settled down in the car seat to watch the landscape go slipping by; he saw little of the outside world, for he was busy with his thoughts.

Since the confidence of the night before, new relations existed between Helen and himself, relations grave and far-reaching in their import, requiring for their fruition the utmost subtlety, tact and secrecy on the part of them both. If his deductions should prove correct, and he was enabled to carry out his plans, retributive justice, swift, terrible, was sure to follow in their wake. On the other hand, if he was working on a false scent, if he should be proved mistaken, he would be held up to the ridicule of all concerned, and to the one he had involved in his scheme, would appear a weak and miserable creature, the blundering victim of his own imagination, envy, and jealousy. Under the galling thought of possible failure, he started from his seat and sought the smoking

car, savagely biting the end from his cigar as he threw himself into a seat behind a rough and boisterous party of three who were playing cards on the small table, provided for the purpose by some railroads.

For some time he paid no attention to the men in front, among whom a bottle circulated at frequent intervals, until a name pronounced by one of them came to his ear.

"Cleverest duck with a brandin' iron, I ever seen," went on the man who had spoken the name. "C'n cover up anything frum A t' Z; wish he c'd make a hullsale scoop right off, but he dassent, yit. I order yeh up."

The speaker was riding backward and Steve had an opportunity to study his face. Where had he seen this man before? Surely, the coarse, bloated features seemed familiar, and this was not the first time he had heard that loud, bullying voice. Then came gradually to his mind the scene of more than a year before, in the cabin of the Mountain Queen, and the squabble he had had with the young gambler who had cheated at cards. It was the same man, and again he heard Guy Kent's parting advice: "Here's yer gun, sonny; be careful how yeh use it." And the ruffian's answer, "I ain't done with you yit; I'll see you ag'in."

A few minutes' fast play, during which the sound of coarse oaths and the thumping of fists on the table as cards were thrown down, filled up the gap in conversation until another deal was being made, then a tall, lanky desperado, bearing a long red scar on his cheek, took up the theme.

"Delays is dangerous," he said in the nasal drawl that betokens the native-born Yankee. "They's a dozen ez good men ez him raound th' diggins, I guess. When it takes ha'f a year t' git t'gether one

carload, it ain't no kind o' biz'ness, an' purty nigh time t' rope in a new leader."

"He's got another ace up his sleeve, I reckon," spoke up the third man, as he dexterously distributed the cards. "Bull thinks so, an' Nita's ketchin' on, too. God help him if she ketches on fur sure; them greaser women won't stand no doublin'."

"Ace or no ace!" persisted the man of the scar, "he's neglectin' his biz'ness, an' ef he don't move purty soon, I'll take charge m'self."

"'Twon't be 'cause yeh ain't cap'ble, Yank," observed the first speaker. "S'pose we hev' a four-handed game. They's a duck settin' yeh that looks promisin', s'posin' we rope him. Open yer bazoo on him, Yank."

Larkin accepted the forthcoming invitation with assumed reluctance. He was almost a novice at card playing, but the opportunity to study the men before him was one not to be lost. So, for an hour, he became one of the party, doing his best to keep up the interest of the game, quiet, observing, almost lowering himself in his own estimation that he might make the most of his opportunity to secure information; yet, when the train reached a junction point where the men left the car, he acknowledged to himself that beyond the fact of his being sure to recognize the parties in the future, and to connect the men with the conversation he had heard, he was no wiser than before.

"So long, stranger, hope t' meet y' 'gin," were the parting words, and Steve's seemingly hearty rejoinder of: "So long, hope it won't be a great while," came back to him afterwards with peculiar significance.

Alone, with only the "click clack" of the car wheels, as they hit the joints in the rails, to play an accompaniment to his thoughts, Larkin summed up

his added knowledge, evidently to his satisfaction, for although his position was far from comfortable, he slept serenely, with a smile on his face.

When on the evening of Steve's third day out from Chicago, Gray Don, fresh from his fortnight's rest at Mamsley's Bluff, brought his rider safely to Cotton Run ranch, Guy Kent stood at the door to welcome him. "Howdy, Stephen!" he cried. "Pleged ef you ain't good fur sore eyes, and sore shoulders, too, fur that matter. Git out, you confounded dogs; feller can't hear himself think! Here, Peter, take Steve's hoss t' th' stable. Jinny, set out th' best they is in th' shanty fur supper. Durn you, Bill 'n Mike, here's Larkin, home frum Shecawgo, and you fellers ain't out here t' see 'im. How's Missy? how's th' stock market? durn't all, Stephen, can't yeh say nothin'?"

"Miss Helen's well, stock market's all O. K. at 4½ to 5 cents, and I c'n talk," was Steve's rejoinder in one breath.

"Who ast y' tell it all to onc't?" the old man cried testily. "They's all night t' tell it, and ef ther ain't, we don't want t' hear it; but come in, come in, y' must be hungrier'n a soo buck in springtime. Git a lope on yeh there, Jinny, Stephen ain't hed nothin' t' eat sence yis'day, and tomorrer'll be th' third day."

That night, when Larkin gave an account of his trip to his eagerly interested audience, he left out all reference to his confidential talk with Helen, and for reasons of his own avoided speaking of certain matters he had seen and heard in the stockyards and on the train. When the company had dwindled down to Mr. Kent and himself he drew from his pocket the receipted bills for freight and expenses, and with the certificate of deposit for the money banked, handed the whole to his employer. The ranchman examined the papers at length, and after putting them away in his desk, filled and lighted his

CHAPTER XVI.

Except for one occasion, the winter following Larkin's visit to Chicago was one of quiet monotony for the dwellers at Cotton Run ranch. There was more snow than usual, which made life on the range more toilsome and fatiguing than common, and which drove hundreds of the weaker cattle to feed at the sheds and alfalfa stacks of the home buildings. The wolves, too, were unusually troublesome, preying upon the calves and young stock, until a general hunt was organized to exterminate them if possible, or at least drive them out of the country. All ranchmen for fifty miles around, with as many of their employees as could well be spared from their duties, participated in the hunt, which was of four days' duration, the whole party rendezvousing at Cotton Run when the affair was over. Wolves were not the only animals that suffered; besides scores of wolf skins the men brought in the carcasses of many deer and antelope, and Major Pike displayed the pelt of a huge grizzly bear. Rogers had the freshly-stripped covering of a full-grown mountain lion, while Larkin and Dave Campbell put in an appearance, each with the skin of a bull buffalo and a big haunch of his meat at his saddle.

Guy Kent, now fully recovered from his hurt, remained at home to welcome the hunters. Here a substantial banquet was tendered them, and at his table the stories of the hunt were told. Lorimer, garrulous, popular, and an intelligent wag, was al-

ways accorded the privilege of the floor on such occasions, and to him, when the meal was over, fell the duty of quizzing the hunters as to their adventures. "Where'd yeh git yer grizzly, majer?" he asked.

"In a hole on the side of a canyon," was the laconic reply.

"Hum! Sort of 'n Isrial Putnam biz'ness. Ever ride yer hoss down a mounting t' save yer country an' yer skin?"

"No, sir. We had the mountain, and the skin, but the British to follow us were lacking."

"Hev an awful fight, er hairbreadth escape er somethin'?"

"I was awfully afraid," the major confessed.

"Come fur yeh, did 'e? Hed a turrible battle, hugged yeh, mebbe?"

"Not a bit of it; I was awfully afraid I wouldn't get him, that was all. You see, Mart and I rather thought there might be a bear in that hole. Mart had his bull's-eye with him, and we thought we'd risk going in. We wasn't disappointed, for there, up on a shelf of rock, snoring away, was Ephraim. Mart held the light and I pumped him full of lead from my Winchester! Come for me! Well, I should think he did; he came for me end over end down the rocks; he was dead when he got to me, though."

The company applauded, and Lorimer proceeded more cautiously.

"Rogers," he said, "tell us how yeh got th' cat."

Rogers responded briskly: "I was ridin' out of a gully where I'd jes' killed three wolves with one shot" (cries of "O! O!" and groans)—"I mean one wolf with three shots, an' was passin' under some thick spruces, w'en th' cat, w'ich I hedn't seen, made a jump fer me out of a tree. By good luck I hed m' rope hangin' at m' saddle, w'ich when 'e sprung 'e

poked his head through the noose. I kicked him off an' drug him three mile; he was dead then, an' I took off his pelt."

"Howd' that bullet hole git in th' pelt?"

"Shot it in t' keep yeh guessin'."

Lorimer changed his tactics. "Pete," he said, addressing one of Rogers' men, who had been with him on the hunt, "is this story of stranglin' th' painter true?"

"Certingly," drawled Pete; "leastwise th' boss wouldn't tell a lie fur nothin', not even fur ten cents; but when 't come t' draggin' ten painters t' death fur a dollar, I wouldn't trust him. I've heerd him tell th' same story nine times, 'thout change, so yeh mought try him with a dollar an' git th' effect."

Lorimer took a silver dollar from his pocket and laid it by Rogers's plate. "Truth!" he demanded.

With the utmost nonchalance Rogers dropped the coin into his pocket, and turned a face full of assumed humility to his questioner. "This is now a matter of biz'ness," he said; "th' cat fell from a tree, dead from heart disease, assisted by a bullet from my little gun."

"Sure yer wa'n't ridin' along, peacefully chawin' tobacco and ruminatin' on th' sin of lyin', when this feroshus feline dropped a hundred feet onto yeh, and begun t' claw a hole into yer vittles?"

"Nope."

"An' yeh didn't gallantly grasp him by th' throat with yer left hand, while yer hoss was a-squimmigin' 'round like a haf-skinned eel, an' you a'carvin' of him up with yer keen bowie knife?"

"Nope."

The questioner groaned. "Yeh've sp'ilt yer future, Rogers," he sighed; "yeh ain't no success as a liar, an' yeh needn't never expect t' describe a western huntin' trip fur an eastern magazine."

When the laugh had subsided Lorimer turned his battery upon the owners of the buffalo hides. "They ain't be'n no buff'ler killed in this country in three years," he said. "Mebbe you fellers c'n onfold a harrowin' tale of where and how ye got 'em."

"Wan't nothin' harrowin' 'bout it," Campbell answered. "Me an' Steve come acrost three cows an' two bulls in a lonesome little holler, in the mount'in; we sneaked 'round an' shot both bulls, an' skinned 'em, fur Steve wanted th' hides to send east."

"What'd yeh do with th' cows?" Kent asked.

"Didn't do nothin' with 'em; we didn't want their pelts, ner meat neither, fur that matter."

"Good boys," cried Major Pike; and his sentiment was the verdict of all.

"Mike," Lorimer queried of the good-natured Irishman, "what'd you bring in?"

"Me harse," was the quick response.

"But what game?"

"Me game leg," said Mike, who was a trifle lame.

"I thought this was a huntin' party."

"Sure, wasn't I huntin' all th' toime?"

"What was yeh huntin' if 't wasn't game?"

"Phwat fur annything but thim three graces, Faith, Hope an' Charity," Connally asserted, gravely.

The company grew interested and Lorimer was puzzled. "Yer guyin' us, Mike," he said presently.

"I was niver more in airnest in me loife," cried Connally; an' av ye'll give me toime, I'll make ut plain t' yez. Three years ago lasht spring, wan toime, I found on th' range a cow wud three calves furninst her; triplets, they wor, be that same token. Wan av 'em was all black excipt th' whoite face av him, wan all rid barrin' a whoite spot bechuckst his shoulders, an' th' other little felly all rid speckled over loike th' schnoot av a Belfast Orangeman—may th' divil fly way wid 'em! Thim calves growed up undher me

eye, an' the onusual relationship give me an interest in 'em. Whin kem th' spring round-up, I put Mr. Kint's brand on 'em mesilf, an' a day er two afther obsarved them lickin' aich other phwere they was burnt, they had that same affection bechuckst 'em. Ez thim steers advanced in age I named th' black wan 'Faith,' fur he was always continted whin th' fade was short, bein' that pashent. 'Hope' was th' rid wan's name, himsif iver hustlin' so fur t' better his condition. I bored no grudge again' th' little spheckled felly on 'count ov his complexion, but named him 'Charity,' fur he was always givin' up to the others. Ye'd niver see wan av thim pasturin' all alone be himsilf whin the other two wudn't be wid 'im."

Connally stopped long enough to wonder at the laugh that went round the table, and proceeded: "They kem at lasht to hev thot habit so sthrong thot they cared nuthin' fur th' company av th' other catle, but wud wander aff be thimselves, phwere I'd foind 'em afther a few days a moile er two from th' bunch. Nayther Faith, Hope ner Charity wor in th' lasht round-up, an' I've be'n sakin' 'em iver sence. I'd no doubt I'd come acrost 'em some'ers durin' th' hunt, they bein' that tame an' apt to not stray, but I must confiss thot I'm disapp'inted. I'm of th' opinion, sorry I am to express th' same, thot thim three graces hes be'n tuk be th' rustlers."

Silence reigned when Connally sat down; there was not a man there, employer or employee, who did not understand the import of Mike's speech, and the deductions drawn by the honest cowboy found an echoing chord in every heart. The stillness was becoming eloquent when Lorimer arose.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it'll be two years this fall sence we'he hed a reg'lar visit from th' rustlers, an' as men in all stations of life must live, I h'ain't no

'doubt but that they're doin' it by pickin' up a few cattle here and ther, jes' enough so's they won't be 'spicioned, till they git ready t' make a big haul. They ain't no doubt in my mind but what them triplets of Mike's hes be'n stole, an' I c'n vouch for a similar disappearance of a few of my own cattle, where I dunno, but I hev my suspicions. If they's ennybody here laborin' under the same suspicion, let's hear from 'em."

Other ranchmen were heard from. Richardson, from farther down the river, had missed a few steers, as had Tibbetts from up stream. Rogers was not sure about it, and Major Pike, whose ranging ground lay so far to the north, was certain that he had lost nothing during the past year, but he sounded the keynote of renewed activity and increased vigilance when he said: "So many of us cannot be mistaken. What has happened is liable to happen again. I wholly agree with Mr. Lorimer that the time for a wholesale raid is about ripe, although in all reason we need not expect it before fall. We have our organization, which let us keep intact, sleeping on our arms, as it were, ready to give the alarm, or to take the field at a minute's notice if need be."

Rogers rose and made a suggestive motion toward his belt. "Are we one?" he demanded, and the whole company, rising as one man, responded: "We are!"

* * * * *

Spring broke early on southeastern Montana, and with it came its duties. The alfalfa on the great field sprung up green and strong, the fruit trees sprang into bud, corn fields, garden and pasture land demanded attention, and Cotton Run ranch, with all its excess of wholesome life, responded:

"Take charge of it, Stephen," the old ranchman said. "What ther is of it, yer to blame fur enny-

way, which is to say they wouldn't hev be'n nothin' ef you hedn't be'n here. There old MacNabb and Wilson, like m'self, purty near in when't comes t' kitin' round on hossback, but lots of days' works in 'em when 't comes t' your biz-ness. Take them two fellers to help yeh, and make Cotton Run ranch a place they read about, but very seldom see."

One morning when the corn was springing and the alfalfa was showing strong and green, Larkin sought his employer.

"I've be'n thinkin'," he announced:

"Yer always doin' that, Stephen, so I ain't surprised. What's in th' wind?" said Guy Kent.

"I was thinkin' 'bout how favorably our alfalfa field is situated fur irrigation. There's One Mile Crick with always lots o' water in it runnin' right past it, and fur that matter, if we hed a good dam, th' water c'd be carried in a dry time to th' garden, er to enny of th' plowed fields."

Kent stroked his long whiskers and thought for a moment.

"When 'd we better build our dam, Stephen?" he asked.

"Sooner th' better; th' dry spell's comin' on, yeh know."

"All right, m' boy, what you say goes, we'll begin to dam that crick to-morrow, wherever you say."

On the morrow a suitable place was selected and the dam completed before came the spring round-up, at which function Steve assisted, and thereat he invested all his savings in calves and mavericks, which henceforth bore the registered brand of an S and an L interlaced. June drew on, and with its last few days came the news of Helen's approaching home-coming. All was excitement and anticipation, for she announced the fact that her friend, Miss

Manning, would accompany her to spend the summer vacation.

On the night Mr. Kent received his niece's letter, Larkin, in obeying his summons, found the ranchman at his desk, holding Helen's announcement in his hand.

"Stephen," he said with an air of great solemnity, "Missy is comin' home; she's on her way now, and I dunno but what she's to Major Pike's this minnit. Her and a gal friend of her'n is goin' to wait there till we come after 'em. Yeh don't s'pose yeh c'd go down there after 'em, do yeh?" anxiously.

Scarcely able to conceal his delight, Larkin answered:

"I s'pose I could, Mr. Kent."

The ranchman drew a long sigh of relief. "Thank yeh, Stephen," he said. "I was afraid yeh might not want t' go, and I'd hef t' ride with that strange gal fur fifty mile. Hitch th' grays 'fore th' new buckboard in th' mornin' and go down. Yeh c'n stop with th' major over night and start back next day."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Stirrup Steve" never made a better appearance than on that morning, when, clad in his new gray suit, his wide felt hat set jauntily on his crisp hair, bright-eyed, happy-faced, the rich blood showing through the bronze on his cheek, he stepped into the new two-seated buckboard behind the dapple grays that were to take him to Pike's Landing, and—*Helen*. Connally, who brought the team round while Steve was dressing, held the restless beasts by the bits until their driver had gathered up his reins, then stood watching the figure in the wagon with pride and satisfaction until it disappeared over the ridge. He graphically described Larkin's appearance to his companions that evening as they lay smoking in the twilight, out on the grass:

"Ye shud 'ave seen thot Staven, drivin' aff lukin' iv'ry inch a king. Naw!" he growled at an impudent youngster who interrupted him with a question, "he didn't hev no bil'd shirt on, nayther; I'm thinkin' Staven wouldn't descind t' thot. Naw! 'twas a blue flannel wid a rowlin' collar, an' a blue silk nicktie, wid inds a fut long floatin' out behind; himself drivin' aff bare-handed, barrin' a pair of buckskin gloves an thim." And Connally to this day is wondering why his description of his beloved "Staven" should cause so much merriment.

Unconscious of anything but the joy of living and the pleasant duty before him, Larkin drove northward over the rough wagon trail. His progress was

necessarily slow, and the noon hour was approaching as he neared the Roger's ranch; then came the rapid beat of hoofs, and Campbell, sitting his horse like a cavalryman, rode to his side.

"Howdy," said Steve.

Campbell ran his eye over the finely appointed turnout and raised his hat in courtly bow. "Howdy, yer nibbs," he returned, solemnly. "Air yeh out seekin' th' *holy* grail, er merely on 'n ev'ryday lady-killin' expedition?"

Steve looked straight at the tips of his horses' ears. "I don't know what a *holy* grail, or any other grail might be, so I ain't a-huntin' that," he replied with a shy laugh. "They ain't goin' to be any ladies killed if I c'n help it, tho' I 'low I'm out after 'em. I'm goin' down t' Pike's Landin' t' fetch home Miss Helen and a friend o' hers."

Campbell gave a long whistle, and gazed sharply at his friend. "I like yer modesty," he said, drily, "and yer color, too, fur that matter. Both of em do yeh credit;" then, noting Steve's look of annoyance, "will yeh honor our humble board with yer comp'ny to grub?" Larkin dexterously flicked a fly from his off horse, and his shyness disappeared. "Many thanks t' yuh, yes sir," he cried.

During the meal at Rogers's hospitable table, the host observed: "By the way, Larkin, we had comp'ny to dinner yest'dy. That young Lawson an' his two men was here. Bright feller, that—said he was goin' down t' Col. Holmes's place t' look at his irrigation ditches. Thinks of doin' somethin' of th' kind on his own place. I was tellin' him 'bout what you'd be'n doin' up t' Cotton Run, an' he thought like's not he'd take a look at yours 'fore he went back."

Larkin was silent, but Campbell made a suggestive remark. "I wonder why Lawson always takes them

two mugs 'long with him whenever he goes anywheres?"

"Didn't know but he'd send some stock home by 'em."

The two young men exchanged quick glances.

"Probably!" Dave muttered, under his breath.

Other matters of interest came up, and nothing more was said of Lawson and his followers.

Before rising from the table, Mr. Rogers extended a warm invitation to Larkin and his party to stop for dinner on their way to Cotton Run. "Ye'll all need yer grub g'inst th' time yeh git here," the ranchman argued, "I ain't seen Missy fur most two years, and a sight of 'Our little Daughter of th' Ranch,' as us fellers round here like t' call her, will do me all sorts o' good. Her an' her gal friend, ought t' be able t' eat onc't what we've got t' eat all th' time."

Steve accepted the invitation, and soon afterward prepared to resume his journey. The friendship between himself and Campbell had grown into a warm intimacy. They had early fallen into the habit of visiting each other frequently, and being of similar tastes, many were the confidences exchanged, although of his earlier life the western-bred boy said but little. On the present occasion he stood beside Steve's wagon indulging, as was his wont, in a by-play of good-natured raillery and ridiculous, high-sounding advice, when Larkin suddenly bent toward him with intense concern in his gaze.

"Dave," he said, "what 'd yeh mean when yeh said 'Probably,' to the idee of Lawson's men takin' off some stock with 'em?"

Campbell's face instantly became grave, and he returned the gaze in kind: "I meant," he answered, slowly, "jes' what I said."

For an instant the friends regarded each other curiously, then both faces broke into a meaning

smile. "Dave," queried Larkin, "what do yeh know?"

"Jes' enough t' know that I don't know much, but what I 'spicion is enough t' make quite a book," was the reply. "What 'd yeh know yerself?"

"'Nough t' make a small book at least, and, like you, 'spicion a lot more. We must git together and compare notes. Mebbe what we *know*, and what we *think* we know will amount t' somethin'."

"Well," concluded Campbell, 'twon't be very pleasant fur you t' git far from home, now fur a spell, so I'll come down some day, and we'll hev a talk."

The red deepened on Larkin's cheek as he watched a white cloud low down on the horizon. "How good you are," he murmured, dreamily, "too good to be kept from yer duty any longer, good-bye."

The buckboard moved off, and Campbell stood watching the receding form of his friend. "He's got it," he said to himself, as he turned to go.

Trains on the new railroad were now running through to Franklin City, and at Pike's Landing, two days before, the Misses Fiske and Manning, with their traveling paraphernalia, had been left. Two pleasant days they had been for the girls. The Pikes had welcomed them with open arms, her friend coming in for a share of the warm friendship, and affection that from childhood had been one of the sweetest things in the life of Guy Kent's niece. There had been two musical evenings, during which every ear on the premises had been delighted with the blending of the well-trained soprano and contralto voices, sang to the fine accompaniment of Mrs. Pike. There had been boating on the river, croquet on the lawn, and pleasant conversations on the wide veranda where the old soldier smoked his cigar and told stories of army and frontier life.

The afternoon of the third day found the veranda

with only the two young ladies sitting there; their hostess, slightly indisposed, had retired to her room, and the Major was on the range. Morning had broken bright and cool, but as the day drew on, the sky had become overcast with a sort of haze, through which the sun glowed with a dull, yellow glare. The air was still and warm. Insects flitted hither and thither, droning and humming, while from the nearby trees came the strident harping of the locust. Between the buildings and the river wound the long brown stretch of the newly graded railroad, from which was borne to their ears the monotonous "Yo-hee! Yo-hee! Yo-hee!" of some laborers' raising track. A dozen times Miss Manning fell asleep over her book, awaking as many times to meet the laughing eyes of her less indolent friend, stitching away blithely at some trifle of fancy work. A fly strolling across her forehead disturbed the thirteenth nap, and she awoke with a start. "There's no use talking, Nell," she said, with something like energy in her voice: "I'll die of sheer laziness if I stay here much longer. Let's go somewhere?"

"Where do you think you would like to go?"

"Major Pike said there were Indian relics to be found in a creek-bed, or hollow somewhere; couldn't we go and search for them?"

"Bless your innocent eastern heart. I have been there; that place is three good miles from here."

"Bother! suppose it is. Both of us have danced three miles in a single evening and thought nothing of it. Anything is better than this; we can take our sunshades, and we won't need to walk fast."

Helen gave way, and after informing Mrs. Pike of their intention, they started out.

The day was waning when they at last entered a long, deep scar that had been cut into bosom of a sandy slope by a cloudburst some years before. From

the standpoint of a collector, they were well rewarded for the exertion of coming; they soon filled their small basket with fossils and relics, climbing then to the top of the ridge to search for what Mary most particularly desired, a pair of buffalo horns. For another half mile they wandered on, culling a flower here and there, careless, happy, thinking only of their pleasant pursuit, when a breath of cool air and a few raindrops smote their cheeks. Together they looked to the northwest, and both screamed in their terror, for there, seemingly within a mile of them, already obscuring the sun, leaving the earth in darkness behind it, writhing, twisting, whirling, came the awful, funnel-shaped cloud, that terror of western life, a cyclone.

"Oh, Helen," moaned Mary, "what is it, what shall we do?"

"Heaven help us, it's a cyclone," came from Helen's white lips. "We can do nothing but try to get to the ravine."

She seized her friend's hand and hurried her away, but before a rod of ground had been covered Miss Manning fell, a senseless heap, by the wagon trail. For an instant Helen bent moaning over the helpless girl, then came the rapid whirr of wheels, and a wagon, drawn by a pair of gray horses dashed to her side. She had only time to recognize in the wild-eyed, hatless man her uncle's young employee, when she was lifted to the wagon without a word, and her companion placed beside her. "Hold her!" he shouted. "D'y know of some holler or ravine?"

"To the right, over the ridge," she gasped, and to the right, bumping, pitching and lurching over the uneven ground, went the buckboard, both girls lying prone on its floor, the driver standing in his place urging, by whip and voice, his running team to still greater exertion as they flew down the long slope,

turned on the level ground at its foot, entering the deep cut just as the storm broke. A moment to deposit his charges in the safest place, at the base of the sheltering bank, then amid the blinding flashes of lightning and the tumult of crashing thunder and roaring wind, with the air full of débris gathered on the cyclone's dread path, with bushels of sand and gravel descending upon them, Larkin held his frightened, cowering horses by the bits. A short deluge of rain followed, and all was over. Larkin drew out his watch; he had consulted it with the hope of outrunning the storm, a minute before finding the girls, and now was surprised to find that but six minutes had elapsed since then.

* * * * *

Miss Manning opened her eyes and gazed about her in a languid fashion.

"Strange place to find one's self," she muttered. "Perhaps, Helen, you'll be good enough to explain where we are, and how your face comes to be so dirty. Let me see, we were out on the prairie, picking flowers and hunting for a pair of buffalo horns, and"—covering her eyes with her hand, "Oh, Nell, that awful cloud in the west, where is it?"

"All gone by, and we are safe, was the soothing reply. "Never mind," wiping the grime from her friend's face, "do you feel better, can you sit up now?" Here is Mr. Larkin who saved us by bringing us here."

This partial introduction was acknowledged by the young lady scrambling to her feet and giving the grimy young man a bright little nod, "I'm very glad to know you, Mr. Larkin," she said. "I'm not exactly clear as to the service you have performed for us, but it must have been something wonderfully brave and clever, or we wouldn't all be so horribly

dirty. If Helen hasn't thanked you, please let me do it for us both."

The young man bowed awkwardly, "I don't b'lieve they's much necessity fur thanks," he said. "I only done what any man would have done if he'd b'en in my place."

"Not every man would have known what to do, nor would every man have acted so quickly," Helen observed. "We owe our lives to you, Mr. Larkin, and you must allow us to thank you. Now, I think, that instead of standing here talking, the best thing we can do is to get where there is water, soap, and dry clothing."

Larkin proceeded to back the horses from the ravine, but was halted by a question from Miss Manning. "Where is your hat, Mr. Larkin?" she asked.

Involuntarily he put his hand to his head, and finding it bare, turned a puzzled face toward his companions: "Why!" he exclaimed, "I had a hat this afternoon when I started from Rogers'; I don't seem to have any now; I hadn't missed it before." A peal of merry laughter greeted his rueful expression, and quickly grasping the humor of the situation, he joined in. There is no better medium for putting people at their ease, than that they should laugh together at the same cause. In that moment the shy young cowboy forgot his bashfulness and timidity, becoming at once the easy, natural man. The elegant Miss Manning lost the society lady in the joyous, healthful young woman, who laughed and chatted as if life was all a jolly lark, and Helen, whose existence had been a combination of extremes, was quietly, strangely, exultingly happy. Thus they drove over the débris-strewn prairie toward Pike's ranch. The path of the storm had been narrow, not covering more than a quarter of a mile in width, and on its edge they met Major Pike and two of his men on

horseback going to search for his guests. There were mutual inquiries and congratulations, a voluble account of the rescue, both girls talking at once, much to the embarrassment of the bare-headed young man holding the reins, especially when the Major insisted on shaking his hand and commending his bravery and forethought; then an urgent request on the part of their host that they drive quickly onward. "Mrs. Pike is nearly crazed with anxiety," he said, "yes, we came in before the storm; we saw it cross the river about two miles above the buildings, so we scarcely got a whiff of it,—" running a quizzical eye over the party, "there's a new box of soap and plenty of warm water at the house; drive on now, drive on."

That evening, while their hostess was engaged in her household duties, and their host was deep in a discussion with Miss Manning, Larkin and Guy Kent's niece sat in a sheltered nook of the moonlit veranda, talking for a long time in low tones. A call to the piano broke up their conference, the man lingering for a moment to say:

"He will be sure to call this week; keep him there a day 'r two, if yeh kin."

The voice of the woman was low but full of firmness: "He shall be kept," she said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

On the morning after the storm, the Pikes stood on the lawn, bidding their guests goodbye. All was in readiness for the start. The bright coats of the grays shone like silver in the sun, their driver, no longer hatless, by grace of Mart's new sombrero, held the reins on the front seat, and behind him, well backed up by two huge trunks, sat his smiling, chattering passengers.

"You will scarcely pull all the way through without a feed?" the Major suggested.

"Scarcely," Steve repeated. "We'll feed and hev our dinner at Rogers's. I promised 'em that yest'd'y. I s'pose Rogers and Campbell 'll jes spread themselves, gittin' up that meal; they don't often hev ladies to dinner."

"I don't suppose there has been a woman in that house since the Major and I called there a year ago," said Mrs. Pike.

"Oh!" cried Miss Manning, "are we actually to have dinner at the regular ranch, where men cook for themselves? What fun!"

"Rogers will be apt to serve you with a good lay-out," the major said, "he's been doing his own house-keeping a good many years, and both he and Campbell are no end of good cooks."

"My, you make me feel hungry already," sighed this healthy, modern young woman.

The final goodbyes were said, and the buckboard moved off up the slope toward the south. They

were soon out of sight of the buildings, the great billowy prairies stretching out before them, with nothing to remind them that men had been that way before, save the wagon track along which they rode. Soon a wind-swept soil strewn with objects foreign to its nature, brought back the event of a few hours before, when together, they were so close to the great unknown.

The wagon stopped for a moment beside the very spot where Helen had knelt in despair over the senseless form of her friend. "You will never know," she said, turning to Mary, "what my feelings were when you lay here like a dead girl, and I, so helpless, saw death coming toward us so swiftly in the shape of that awful cloud. Mr. Larkin, don't you think that God is ever mindful of us, and that he sent you here to save us?"

The young man removed his hat, and there was sublimity in his solemn face as he said: "I b'lieve in God, and his Fatherhood; that's 'bout all th' creed I've got. Ev'ry man has a sense of right and wrong, and if he don't do what his conscience tells him is right, jes' because it's the right thing to do, he's no right to expect a great 'eal from God. Yes, I think he sent me to help you yest'd'y, but you mus'n't furgit that th' help wasn't all on one side; if you hedn't told me where t' drive out of th' wind, I'd a-be'n caught on the open prayrie, and prob'ly dashed to pieces. God ain't a bit one-sided, you know."

The eyes of both girls were filled with tears, and silence fell upon them; then Helen began to sing the words of the dear old hymn, "God moves in mysterious ways, his mercies to perform," the others catching the spirit and joining in, till the still air was full of melody. Who shall say that this song of praise, coming from the inner recesses of those pure young

* Should be
God moves in a mysterious way,
His mercies to perform.
Jm

hearts, was not fully as acceptable as the chantings of a surpliced choir in some grand cathedral?

On sped the gray horses, mile after mile falling away behind them, hill and hollow, dune and dingle, rock and tree-fringed rivulet all unfolding a page of new delight to the visitor who saw them for the first time. Once the track crossed a strip of grassland where cattle fed and a silent man on horseback waved them a friendly greeting, and several times Steve stopped the horses that a curious fossil or a wayside blossom might be captured. It was nearing noon when Helen said, "We are coming to Mr. Rogers's place, are we not?"

Larkin pointed to a distant clump of cottonwoods. "Right there, Miss Helen," he replied, "we'll be there in a quarter hour."

Miss Manning seemed to be thinking. "Let me see," she said, slowly, "did I understand that one of the men we are to meet is named Campbell?"

"Sure," was Steve's answer. "David Campbell, Mr. Rogers's right-hand man. Why?"

"Nothing, only I once met a young man named David Campbell, a collegian, just graduated; he was the son of a wealthy mine-owner somewhere in Colorado. Three years ago I spent some weeks at a summer resort on Lake Superior, and there was introduced to this young man; he was then about eighteen years old, tall, blond, blue-eyed and very original and independent in his views of the world and its people."

"That description tallies pretty well with our Campbell," Helen said, "don't you think so, Mr. Larkin?"

"Suits him exactly," Larkin responded; "only one thing lackin', Dave's never be'n t' college."

Rogers had everything in readiness, and was waiting for his guests when they arrived. A hat had been

thrust into the empty sash through which "Bridle Bill" had hurled a teacup intended for the head of one of his companions, a few days before. The pile of saddles, harnesses, blankets, ropes, lassoes and old boots had been removed from their usual place in the corner of the main living room, floors and furniture were yet damp from a severe scrubbing, and the table, for once decorated with a snow-white cloth, was set forth with the odd collection of chinaware, bought piecemeal as it was needed.

The ranchman himself, heated and flushed from his culinary duties, appeared at the door to welcome them. A gentleman in the rough, was he, clean, respectably garbed, his long hair combed smoothly back from his well-shaped forehead; a man, in short, and as such, full of manly, unconscious dignity. He assisted the young ladies to alight, kissed the "Daughter of the Range" without ceremony, gravely acknowledging his introduction to Miss Manning the while. "Take yer friend in t' th' settin' room, Helen," he said, "ye'll find water an' tow'ls there. Stephen, drive t' th' stable; François's there an' he'll tend t' yer hosses; then come t' th' house. Dave an' me is hustlin' th' grub in th' kitchen."

To a person having a fondness for the unusual, such as had Miss Manning, the room into which Helen ushered her friend was indeed a delightful revelation. Rogers was no mean taxidermist, evidences of his skill being everywhere present. Buffalo and deer heads gazed at her, and an elk reared his great antlers from the walls. Wild turkeys, grouse, and prairie fowl peeped coyly at her from behind chair or home-made settee, while brackets and shelves held colonies of strange snakes, toads, and lizards, apparently living in a whole arsenal of stone implements, and weapons of a bygone race, the like of which she had never dreamed. So absorbed was

she in these that she failed to notice Helen's departure from the room. She was standing on the tawny skin of a mountain lion, examining a curiously carved Indian pipe, when Helen's voice called her back to her surroundings. "We are informed that dinner is served, Mary, and you will allow me to present the chef, 'My friend Miss Manning, Mr. Campbell.'"

All three men had entered the room, prepared only for the simple ceremony of an introduction. There was a short interval of silence attendant upon the surprise of both parties, a slight rise of color on the face of the lady, which was reflected in the momentary confusion of the young man, then Campbell electrified those who had known him only as the illiterate cowboy. "This is indeed a pleasant surprise, Miss Manning," he said. "I had anticipated meeting a friend, for all of Miss Helen's are ours; but I was wholly unprepared for a renewal of our acquaintance at this time."

Miss Manning put her hand in his, giving a peculiar little laugh as she returned his greeting. "Yours is a land of surprises, Mr. Campbell, and chief among those that have fallen to my lot is this meeting. One of the most agreeable feature of this surprise is the information that you have become famous as a *chef-de-cuisine*; and," flashing him a coquettish glance, "we are more than anxious to have a substantial proof of your skill."

"The proof awaits you, gentle lady," he said, bowing low, "I precede you to the banquet hall." He led the way, followed by the two girls.

Rogers, lingering behind, to turn a puzzled face to Steve. "Stephen," he whispered, anxiously, "c'n you understand it?"

"Dave knowed her before," Steve returned.

"Yes, but when'd he git that talk?"

"He's be'n a-foolin' us, I guess."

At table Miss Manning directed most of her conversation to their host, insuring her place in his estimation by showing an intelligent interest in his work, and drawing him out on his pet hobbies of relic-hunting, natural history and taxidermy. Helen and Steve made excellent listeners, while Campbell, over whom had fallen a new, strange dignity, attended to the needs of others, making frequent trips to the kitchen, whence he bore ample evidence of man's acquired skill in cookery. To this food the guests brought appreciative appetites.

"Mr. Campbell," said Miss Manning, at the conclusion of the meal, "your many accomplishments do you credit. I remember you as a crack baseball player, a fine oarsman, a strong swimmer," she lingered for a moment over the last word, "a champion tennis player and the valedictorian of your class. Now, you bob up serenely as an expert cook. Really, sir, your talents have a wide range."

Campbell's light laugh showed traces of embarrassment. "I am glad you have enjoyed it," he said. "Mr. Rogers is responsible for the most of the cooking."

The ranchman shot him a keen glance from beneath his shaggy brows. "We all knowed," he announced, drily, "that Dave c'd shoot an' ride an' rope an' swim an' play ball better'n most fellers, but 't seems they's some things he c'n do he's never told us 'bout."

"What people don't know never worries them very much," the young man responded, with a touch of warmth in his tones.

"Right yeh are, my boy," cried Rogers, "it's yer own biz-ness, but yeh'll 'low that mindin' other folkses' biz'ness is a good sight more fun fur most people than tendin' to their own affairs is. Agin, it's nec'sary sometimes to mind ev'rybody's biz'ness

er we wouldn't hev no laws ner nothin'. Ev'ry man's got a right to hide his light under a bushel, if he wants to, but fellers like you, hevin' a good big light, hed ought let 'er shine."

Campbell laughed again. "I never thought that mine was a particularly great light," he said, "but as what there is of it seems now to be at least partly uncovered, I will take this opportunity to lift the bushel entirely. I was born and raised in Colorado, as I have told you all. My father was, and I suppose is still, engaged in the mining industry there, and owns some property. My mother died while I was a mere baby, and my father being a busy man, I was left to the mercies of nurses and hired people in general. Father cared for me, however, and gave me a good education. I spent the summer of my graduation on the shores of Lake Superior, and there met Miss Manning. On my return, father wanted me to take a position in his office, a place I always detested. I objected and told him so. As a result we had a violent quarrel, which my father, who is very hasty when angered, brought to a close by ordering me out of doors and adding a hope that he would never see my disobedient face again. I had a little money, a horse, and a decided liking for life on the range. Putting the first into my pocket, I mounted the second, and started out to gratify the last. After a few days' ride over the country I came here, found employment and I'm here yet. The bushel is now removed, Mr. Rogers; you know all the rest."

Rogers sat with his eyes fixed on the earnest young face. "Dave," he asked, "wher'd yeh git yer knowledge of range talk, an' why d' yeh use it, ennyhow?"

"I had been much with cattle men from a boy," was the reply, "and when one goes to Rome, he likes to do as the Romans do. You well know that there

is a good deal of difference in being one of a company, or merely being with a company. To you, here, I have told all there is to tell. I think it will be better to allow my relations to all others, except, perhaps Mr. Kent, to remain as they always have been. Please respect my confidence."

A ready promise came from all, then Larkin suggested a start, Campbell accompanying him to the stable. François had disappeared, and the two were alone. "Dave," said Larkin, "'bout when d'yeh think Lawson 'll git round to our place?"

"Lemme see," drawled Campbell, "t'day's Thursday—'bout Sat'dy, night, I reckon."

"Drop that!" cried Steve, using the first sharp tones he had addressed to his friend since the latter had spoiled his hat. "After this, please be what yeh *are*, when we're alone; be what yer a-*min'* to when they's others 'round. If yeh think our man's likely t' be there, mebbe yeh'd better ride over same evening. Will yeh come?"

"I think so, but there are—there are—circumstances to be considered; I'll probably come."

"You will visit us, Mr. Rogers," Helen said, when the buckboard was ready to start.

"Jes's often 's I c'n git away," was the hearty response.

"You will come too, Mr. Campbell?"

Campbell looked past the speaker and inquired of a pair of soft brown eyes belonging to the other occupant of the seat. He must have seen some encouragement there, for he replied promptly, "I shall be pleased to do so."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was night at Cotton Run ranch. Long before sundown the buckboard party had arrived and had been duly welcomed by Guy Kent and his people. At Helen's request, tea had been served on the veranda, after which the master lit his great meerschau, prepared to enjoy the full measure of this rare occasion. Larkin lingered for a few minutes, sitting on the edge of the steps with his hat on his knee, then excusing himself on account of duties to perform, strode off toward the stables.

All eyes watched the receding figure until it was lost from sight round the corner of a building.

"What a fine looking young man that is," observed Miss Manning, directing her remark to her host. Kent's eyes kindled, and his voice was tremulous with eager warmth; the young visitor had struck a responsive chord.

"My girl," he cried, "his looks air th' least part of him; lots o' fellers is jes' 's good lookin' as Larkin, but fur downright manhood they ain't one in ten thousand c'n touch him. Our ranch life, yeh'll readily understand, tho' it's beginnin' to be better now, is a good deal like our country roads ust t' be way back in ol' Vermont, 'spec'ally in th' spring of th' year; mud frum fence t' fence and not much chanct t' git through 'thout more er less of it stickin' fast to yeh. Well, Steve's be'n with me most two year, now, and I guess they ain't much of our life he ain't hed a taste of; some mud is apt t' stick when one

have anney. Wor-r-k out yer details be yerself, I havin' no taste that way, but whin comes th' round-up, I wudn't miss ut fur th' wor-r-r-ld."

Home, through the starlit darkness, rode Larkin, thinking many thoughts. Connally's prediction of stirring events in the near future had not startled him, for he was of the same mind; already in possession of sufficient evidence to warrant some arrests, his were yet but well grounded suspicions, the successful issue of which he doubted. True, he had made a partial confidante of Helen, but on her depended only a small part of the great scheme he hoped to encompass. Nothing less than the capture and destruction of the whole cattle-stealing gang would satisfy him now, and in order to accomplish this he must have a confidante on whom he could depend. His mind naturally reverted to Campbell; he, too, seemed to be on track of something, only a faint inkling of which had been hinted, and before he sought his pillow that night he was fully determined to tell his friend all, and to ask his co-operation and advice.

The evening at Cotton Run had been one of keen enjoyment to the doting old ranchman, who held his niece as the dearest thing on earth. There was no music, only gentle swinging in the big rockers on the veranda, while Kent told thrillingly interesting stories of the frontier, or in his turn listened to anecdotes of school and city life from his lively young companions.

In the privacy of their rooms, Helen revived the name of Campbell. "Strange, isn't it," she said, "that an educated young man should choose to lead the life of an everyday cowboy, and stranger yet, that he should adopt their rough manners and speak their dialect, don't you think so, Mary?"

"Men of the day, especially young collegians, are apt to do some queer things, averred Miss Man-

the home news, changed the subject. "Is there any small, outlyin' bunches of cattle, Mike?" he asked.

Connally scratched his head and thought hard.

"Staven," he said at last, "cattle do be much loike min; most av 'em is sociable, takin' deloight in th' soci'ty av ther fellies; ithers air bor-n-n rowdies, sakin' divarsion only wid thim av loike moind. Ther's a gang av sich all alone up in th' hills 'bout tin moiles frum here; six av 'em ther is, aich wan a nachral hobo, th' boss rascal bein's a big whoite steer wid Guy Kint's brand an him. Dhivil a wan av us kin take thot gang straight; rinnin' away they'll be in spoite av us to a valley to th' southaist, ferninst th' canyon where ye saved th' graser that toime."

"Did th' 'Three Graces' ever range there?" asked Steve.

"Did they?" cried Mike. "Faith, thot were phwere thim same 'Graces' mit ther Waterloo, God bliss th' Frinch fur th' mim"ry av ut. It's the idintical ground they disappeared frum, as ithers will thot ob-sarve thim habits."

"What d'yeh mean by that, Mike?"

"I mane thot to th' foot av thot valley phwere thim steers do be rinnin', is a spring av good wather, an' be th' spring rins th' southaistern trail. Ut's a good place t' camp by thot same, an' rustlers hev lift ther ashes there more than wan toime; whin they come agin, thim six rascals 'll go to kape comp'ny wid th' 'Graces.'"

"How soon, Mike?"

"Most anney toime, now; they're purty nigh due."

Larkin drew up his bridle rein, preparatory to a start. "Well, Mike," he said, "things is movin' 'long satisfact'ry. I guess you understand me."

"Dhivil a wan av ye understhands th' less, Staven. But me b'y, yer playin' ag'inst a desp'rit innemy; av ye'd win, ye must kape yer head cool, er ye won't

to my rescue. I don't think I knew just what I was doing, but those on shore who saw it, say that I clasped my arms about his neck and that I nearly strangled him, thus giving him no chance to cling to his boat, which drifted away, leaving him no alternative but to swim for it. He got me to shore somehow, though, and Mamma had me taken to the hotel. Next morning when we looked for him to thank him, we found he had already left the place. I never saw him again until to-day. Do you think I should thank him yet?"

"A duty postponed is not a duty performed," Helen quoted, "don't you think he is a splendid fellow?"

Miss Manning put a hand on either side of her friend's face and looked steadfastly into her eyes. "Don't you think," she asked, "that there are other splendid fellows about here?"

Saturday afternoon came, and with it the young ranchman from Mizpah River way. Evidently Lawson had taken advantage of his trip to the city to improve his wardrobe, for on this occasion he was neatly clad in a new summer suit, albeit his neckwear was still of a vivid hue, and some additions had been made to his display of glittering jewelry. He came alone, having sent his men on ahead to attend to some home duties of importance. Guy Kent welcomed him with open arms, calling his niece and her guest to assist him in doing the honors.

An hour previous to Lawson's arrival, Larkin had started out on foot for his daily inspection of the farming lands. His first visit was to the garden, where he viewed with satisfaction the long rows of thrifty vegetables; next, wading the river at a shallow point, he crossed the alfalfa field already knee-deep with luxuriant vegetation, inspected the dam above it, then turned and made his way to the great

cornfield on the river bottom. The rows were a good half mile in length, straight as they could be drawn, the product strong, thrifty and of that peculiar, dark green color that delights the eye of the husbandman. At last he reached the corner of the field by the stream, and resting beneath the shade of a cottonwood, gave speech to his thoughts: "Well, that's a purty likely prospect fur a crop; guess I'll have old Mac and Bill keep them cultivators runnin' awhile yet."

"What's the matter with the eye of the master doing more work than both his hands?" cried a merry voice, but a little way distant.

The man in the cornfield showed no signs of surprise, but continued to think aloud. "The eye of th' master is fixed on dif'rent things," he said, "not bein' an athelete, ner the vally-dick-somethin' of his class, he's watchin' things grow, and waitin' fur somethin' t' turn up."

"Well, if you're waiting for something to turn up," persisted the voice, "perhaps you wouldn't mind turning this way to find it."

"Sometimes folks know things they don't see," continued Larkin.

"And sometimes folks see more than they really know, in which event communion is good for the soul," interrupted Campbell, for the owner of the voice was he. "I say, Steve, suppose you come over here and we compare notes."

Steve scaled the wire fence and was with his friend. "I didn't expect yeh so soon," he said.

"Nor did I expect to come so soon," was the reply, "but about eleven o'clock, his nibbs of Mizpah River way pulled up, had his dinner with us, and announced his intention of visiting Cotton Run this P. M. I thought that perhaps we could use the time profit-

ably between now and night, so I saddled up and moseyed along."

"Was Mr. Lawson alone when he come?"

"He was; said important business demanded that he send his men home, so he sent 'em."

"Dave Campbell, what yeh know would make quite a book."

"Thank you, hero of a Montana cyclone, that is so much better than your lately expressed sentiments."

For an hour the young men lay beneath the cottonwoods discussing their plans in confidential tones, arising at the end of the time to clasp hands as a token of perfect confidence.

"Dave," Larkin said, "never hes two men undertook a more serious job than this; whatever comes, er doesn't come, we must stay by each other. One, and mebbe both of us is liable t' git done up 'fore this thing is over, fur th' men we've got to deal with don't hesitate at trifles. I'd like t' make this agreement with yeh: if it's *you*, I'll stick to yeh through thick and thin, dead er alive; if it's me"——

Campbell threw his hat on the ground and put his foot upon it: "Old man," he interrupted, wringing the other's hand, "don't doubt for a moment that I won't stay by."

An instant they stood there hand in hand, but when Larkin said: "Stay where you are, Dave. I don't know that it's nec'sary to interview Uncle Guy and th' comp'ny he's likely t' hev by this time, so I'll try t' git a private sinch on Peter er Jinny fur some grub, and meet yeh here in an hour."

CHAPTER XX.

Black Peter was passing the stables from the poultry house whence he had been dispatched by his wife for eggs, when Larkin's low whistle called his attention. "Peter," asked the young man, "where's the boss?"

"Him an' Mistah Lawsing an' th' young ladies am settin' on th' piazza, Mistah Larkin."

"All right, we'll let 'em set there; now, Peter, I know you're a good friend o' mine, and so's Jinny. Jes' you slip round to th' kitchen and hev Jinny fill that basket you've got with good grub; bread-an-butter, cold meat, er anything she's got handy; then you fetch it back t' me 'thout sayin' a word to ennybody."

"W'y, Mistah Larkin"—

"Never mind, Peter; do jes's I tell yeh, here"—slipping two half dollars into the black hand. "Give one of 'em t' Jinny, and hurry back. Git a gait on yeh, now."

Scarcely had Peter disappeared when Larkin went swiftly to the reserve stall, where he knew Lawson's horse to be standing. Carefully he looked the animal over, and observing that its fore feet were shod, lifted and examined each with critical care. One shoe was of a peculiar design, evidently made to correct a defect in the foot, for a short bar of steel connected the two ends across the heel. "I'd know that shoe, er its track, 'mong all th' horseshoes in th' world," he thought.

Gray Don was saddled and bridled, when Peter returned with a full basket of provisions. Larkin produced a haversack, and held it open. "Good boy, Peter," he ejaculated, "stuff th' grub into this bag; now, watch me mount. I'm ridin' toward Mr. Lorimer's place—you savey?"

Leaving the grinning negro gazing after them, the gray horse and his rider crossed the stream, disappearing shortly behind the willows that fringed the opposite bank.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lawson was enjoying his visit with Mr. Kent and the two young ladies. A witty and fluent conversationalist, he had at first proceeded with caution, for he knew not what reports of his rencontre with Larkin had reached the ears of his host; but as time flew along, bringing no reference to the subject, he rightly concluded that the matter had not been spoken of, and that his place in the estimation of the ranchman had not suffered. To Mr. Kent, the subjects of cattle breeding and ranching were always welcome themes, and on these topics the visitor not only again proved himself an able exponent, but showed that he was fully posted on all modern ideas calculated to improve life on the range, as well as to make it pleasant and profitable. Miss Manning evidently thought him interesting, and Miss Fiske seemed interested in his well-bred talk of the current topics, music and literature of the day,—for he had the air, and the information of one well educated, well read and well traveled.

The cottonwoods along the stream were throwing long shadows on the alfalfa field beyond when Lawson consulted his watch with the remark: "By the way, Mr. Kent, I have visited Col. Holmes and inspected his irrigating plant. Mr. Rogers tells me that you have been making a move in that direction, and the principal object of my visit is to look over what

you have done, so as to compare it with what I have seen. I am thinking of going quite extensively into irrigating, and of course, need all the information I can secure."

Mr. Kent bestirred himself: "We ain't hed a chance to use our'n yet," he explained, "so we don't know how it's goin' t' work, but that needn't keep you from seein' it, such as 'tis. Re'ly, I don't know 's much 'bout it as one of my boss boys, who thought th' thing up, and we'd ought t' hev him along. Peter," calling the black to the kitchen door, "d'yeh know where Stephen happens t' be jes' now?"

"Mistah Larkin got on his hoss an' rode off toward Mistah Lorimer's place some time ago, sah."

"Well," muttered Kent, "he often rides up t' Lorimer's on Sat'd'ys. I spose I c'n show yeh th' dam 'thout him."

"Please don't be gone too long, gentlemen," spoke up Helen, "tea will be ready soon."

"Really, Miss Fiske," Lawson hesitated, "I should be on my way home, even now."

Helen gave him a bewitching smile, "Oh, we can't possibly spare you to-night, Mr. Lawson," she cried, "Miss Manning and I have a musical treat in store for this evening, and we need your grand baritone to make it a complete success. You must be our guest until morning." And the highly flattered young man (Ah, he was not the first, nor will he be the last to yield to the seductive voice of woman) consented.

The two men had scarcely left the premises when old Wilson came in from his work. Helen flew to him and placed a caressing hand on his arm. "William," she said in low tones, "Mr. Lawson is here."

"What!" shouted Bill, "that d——, I beg yer pardon, Missy; I furgot m'self that time, now, what of it?"

"Only this: please don't show any dislike to him,

and use him well, just because I ask you to, will you, Uncle William?"

Bill gazed at her in astonishment. "I'll do it 'cause you ask me to, Missy," he blurted out, "but yeh'd better keep him somer's where Steve can't git at him, er he'll mop up th' earth with im."

"Now you've promised to be good, I'll risk the rest," was the laughing rejoinder.

"Helen," said Mary, when the girls were again alone on the veranda. "I never knew you as a coquette, what object have you in behaving so beautifully to that vulgar-looking young man?"

Miss Fiske's color rose. "I have an object," she replied. "That I confess; if you are a good little girl, maybe you'll know, some time."

That night, while his enemy was dancing attendance on the young ladies at the ranch, Larkin and his companion were far out among the hills riding through the starlit, luminous night, along the trail that led to the southeast. So far, they were familiar with their way, along which they jogged in almost utter silence, the nature of the ground and their peculiar mission forbidding much conversation. They were many miles out when Larkin reined in his horse and allowed Campbell to come to his side. "Dave," he said, "we ain't far from th' shack where I pulled in th' greaser that time. S'pose we go into camp there and wait fur daylight t' do th' rest."

"Suppose we should find the shack tenanted; the greaser knows all about that snug camping place, you know."

"I've thought about all that, too. Them fellers know it is one of our out-stations, and fur all's they know, we're occupyin' it this present minute; no, I ain't changed my opinion any, they don't want t' run foul of nobody, and they'll wait fur their boss to the old place by th' spring under th' big rock; they

ain't one chance in a hundred of their bein' seen, there."

"Ride ahead then, Steve; I'm with you, is the place locked?"

"Yes, but I've got th' key; turn to th' left and ride right along, th' ground's good."

The little shanty in the canyon was found to be untenanted, nor had anything been disturbed. A moment to picket out their horses, and a few minutes devoted to the contents of the haversack, brought to close a day of activity, after which they slept well.

On the following morning, Campbell was awakened from a sound sleep by the sharp crack of a revolver twice fired. Springing from his couch, he took but time to discover that he was alone, then rushed out of doors, gun in hand, prepared to take an active part in whatever was going on. Larkin was coming from the spring bearing a brace of freshly killed part-ridges. "Mornin', old man," he cried gaily. "Spring chicken fur breakfast."

Campbell frowned. "Why don't you scare a fellow to death and be done with it?" he growled, "and besides, I doubt the wisdom of making a great deal of noise round here."

"Dave, yer wisdom is good and mighty well put," Steve exclaimed, "but did yeh ever watch a cat when she was huntin'?—how still and cautious she is, yet ev'one that sees her knows that's what she's out fur er she wouldn't be so quiet; bimeby, if it's a good day fur mice, she goes along home, 'thout any caution 'tall, even t' yowlin' a little by way of diversion. Nobody thinks she's huntin', then. We're on our own ground yet, and we musn't appear t' be huntin'."

"A pistol shot is mighty good evidence that there's men not far off," responded Dave, not yet convinced.

"A pistol's apt t' go off anywhere in these parts,

and nothin's thought of it; besides, the party we're lookin' fur, if they're there 'tall, is a good five miles from here; we don't care a rap fur anybody else; will yeh pick these birds, er build a fire? They's salt and pepper in th' shack."

"I'll pluck and prepare the birds, thus keeping up my reputation as chef-de-cuisine. My lord, thy wisdom is greater than mine."

"Well, Stephen," Campbell remarked when the meal was finished, "you are running this institution; suppose you make known your general plan for to-day."

"My plan is to hide the horses, either here, or in some other good place, and go down the valley 't where th' crick loses itself to the foot of a long hog-back; we'll climb to th' top o' that ridge, and sneak along there fur about three miles straight east; then we'll be on a high, rocky p'int overlookin' th' spring, which I've dranked from lots o' times. 'Taint more'n a hundred yards from th' southeast trail, but they's lots of trees and bushes there, and it's a common restin' place; plenty o' wood and good water."

"You propose to watch and listen from the top of the rocks you mention?"

"You've hit it eggsactly. Th' top of th' rock's about twenty feet above th' spring, and bein' covered with thick cedars, is a mighty good place t' hide where we c'n see and hear all that's goin' on!"

"Suppose there's nothing going on?"

"We'll git left then, like many others hev, and my the'ry's no good."

"Don't you think we had better take our horses nearer? We might need them, quick, and we wouldn't have them."

"I guess you're right. They's some thickets 'long th' ridge, where we c'n hide 'em."

The plan was put into immediate execution, a ride

of half an hour bringing them to where the little stream was lost in a piece of marshy ground thickly grown with trees and bushes. Here the horses were concealed, and the two, to use Steve's term, climbed the ridge and began "sneaking" along its apex toward the point where they hoped to learn so much.

At first the ground was wholly bare, and had there been any to observe, the hurrying figures might have been seen for miles; then came low bushes of greasewood, stones, detached rocks, larger bushes, small trees, and finally a thick growth of cedars. "Go slow, now," Steve whispered, "we're pretty nigh there."

Then a pungent smell of burning wood came to their nostrils, and as they crept nearer to the brink, the sound of voices betokened the presence of men. A little nearer, and they had reached their vantage ground from which they could see Lawson's two men, seated by a small fire, and could hear every word they said.

Sampson was haranguing his companion in a loud voice, part of his inspiration, at least, being derived from a black bottle beside him.

"We're a pair o' bloomin' hidiots, Pede," he was saying, "a pair o' bloomin' hidiots, I said, an' don't yeh dare t' say we hain't." He glanced at the silent Mexican and proceeded: "Jes' think of our boss, him as ust t' be a boss as was a boss, an' see wot e's got down to; that's wot's breakin' me 'eart." He paused to shed a few drunken tears. "Pedro wot was th' d'rection 'e give us?"

"Val, he say, 'maka de long ride were nobuddy see; you coma de spreeng, you wait; I maka sundown dat place, suah.'"

The Cockney took a swallow from the bottle, and again broke forth in sobs and lamentations: "'E's a bloody fine boss, 'e is," he blubbered, "a bloke wot's

got a dozen good men an' one 'oman dependin' on 'im fur a livin', an' 'im 'angin' round th' lass yonder."

The Mexican leaped to his feet, his eyes blazing, his hand traveling toward the butt of his revolver. "Vata lass?" he demanded.

"Heasy there, Pede," bawled the Englishman, "yer a bigger bloomin' fool 'n I took yeh t' be. Hafter one more good big 'aul, th' boss's going hout o' biz'ness; goin' t' settle down an injoy th' fruits of 'is labors, 'e says; well, 'e's 'angin' round ol' Guy Kent's gal t' make 'er 'is 'elpmate some day."

"Boss gotta onea woman," the Mexican said, doggedly.

Sampson gave a loud, coarse laugh. "Wot's th' diff'rence if he 'ave, matey," he sneered, "cawn't 'e 'ave two? Cawn't 'e be a bloomin' Mormon if 'e wants to?"

Pedro grasped the butt of his pistol, his face working in nervous energy. "Nita, me sist," he hissed. "Boss mus' no take onea more woman. Me no like; bomby——"

"'Old on there," interrupted Sampson, "we've got somethin' of more himportance than wimmin t' talk about. I says th' boss ain't givin' us a square deal, gal er no gal. Wot with Yank Flint gone north with three men, Gonzales hexplorin' th' south with Enrico an' Juan, Casey an' his gang t' Gawd knows where, on a spree, an' us fellers 'ere waitin' fur th' boss, th' ain't a livin' soul to 'ome t' guard th' 'proaches but Nita,"

The Mexican sat down and reached for the bottle. "Nita all right," he said in the same dogged tone.

"Ya'as," mocked the Englishman, "Nita's h'all right, but with 'er fifty mile away as th' crow flies, an' not a soul of a man about, tell me 'oos t' guard th' bloomin' 'ome ranch? I tell yeh th' ranchmen's like-

ly t' git ther bloody heyes open some day, an' th' fust thing we know they'll be sneakin' hup th' crick an' givin' us a supprise. We ain't took a 'oof sence las' fall, an' 'ere 'tis June, an' th' boss still hexplorin' an' hexploitin' fur th' Haugust raid. I tell you, me long 'aired friend, I'll never leave this bloody ground till I've 'ad an 'and in cooperin' th' six of ol' Kent's steers we seen last night."

Pedro roused himself and showed some interest. "Six-a head no mek mucha diff'rence," he said. "Señor Kent he neva tink."

"'Course 'e won't, me buck; an we'll be that much a'ead in Haugust; but 'ere we've got t' stay, waitin' fur 'is bloody comin', w'en we might 'ave that six 'ome inside of forty-eight hours; th' idear, an' him a devilin' round a gal."

Steve touched his companion and whispered: "Let's go."

"Let's go where?" was the cautious reply.

"Why, t' find that home ranch, er whatever yeh call it, where Nita's home alone; that's the place we're lookin' fur."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Away from the sound of voices the young men crept, to straighten up and walk rapidly toward their horses after the first hundred yards had been made. Campbell was first to speak. "Larkin," he said, "what is your idea of this home ranch?"

"Don't seem to me it could hev but one meanin'. I never took much stock in the Mizpah River plant, but I've always be'n of the opinion that they was a place, som'ers, purty well hid I should s'pose, where these fellers kept ther stock till they c'd git red of it. We're dead onto th' rustlers and ther leader, now, and ev'rything seems to be comin' our way. Our work is cut out fur us; we've got t' find th' den of these robbers before we sleep."

"Sampson gave us one good bit of information," Campbell remarked; "he told us how far it is."

"Fifty miles as th' crow flies," quoted Steve. "And he gave us another fine send-off; he said that some-un 'd come up th' crick and surprise 'em some day."

"The question of direction is going to bother us as much as anything," said Dave, tentatively.

"We've got t' take counsel on that. Now, we're sure that it ain't towards th' north, and purty sure it ain't west or south. That leaves us northeast, east, and southeast t' choose from."

"Northeast is scarcely to be thought of, for that would soon put them on the open prairie," said Campbell.

"You're right; our best chances lay to th' south-

east among th' mountains. Come t' think, whenever a feller sees one er more of these ducks, he's always workin' his way in that direction. We both know th' lay of th' land. I propose that we make a round-about and strike th' trail farther up. What d'y think?"

The horses, fresh and well-rested, were prepared for the journey. Before mounting, Larkin looked at his watch. "Just nine o'clock," he announced. "Dave, how long will it take t' put fifty mile of trail behind us?"

"Probably eight hours, if we don't make too many stops."

They mounted, and making a wide détour to the south, struck the southeast trail at least ten miles from where Lawson's men lay awaiting the coming of their leader.

The "southeast trail" was old and well defined. For ages before the coming of the white men, the Indians had used it as a thoroughfare for war and hunting parties; many a sturdy pioneer had come into Montana that way; prospectors had tramped over it in their search for precious metals, and once, during the old Indian troubles, a regiment of cavalry had come over the trail to the relief of Fort Franklin.

Up and down this broad trail they rode with all to gain or all to lose. Through billowy stretches of sand where not even a bush grew to break the monotony, following gushing, willow-fringed streams, riding through thick reaches of pines and cedars, round perilous precipices and over rugged mountains, saying but little, but ever on the lookout for what might happen. When noon came they turned aside to a little savannah where the grass grew green and thick, allowing their horses to feed there while they ate from the diminishing supply in the haversack. Then on, through a still wilder country, where

the mountain tops grew higher, the valleys deeper and more gloomy. A strange, eerie, melancholy country, where the only trace of man's former presence was the path they trod.

The sun's rays had reached a long angle when they came to a broad, shallow stream in the mountains. On its brink they paused, and were allowing their horses to drink, when Larkin uttered a short exclamation and sprang from his saddle. "See here!" he cried, triumphantly pointing to the mud at his feet.

"See what?" demanded his companion. "I see nothing there but some old horse tracks."

"That's all I see," said Steve's low, tense voice, "but among them is a track that is mighty interestin'; d'yeh see that one with the impression of a bar across the heel? Well, Lawson's horse left the track, for that's th' way his right for'ard foot is shod. Our man has be'n here in less'n a week."

"I have no doubt of it," said Campbell. "About here is where we hoped to find traces of him. Let's see," consulting his watch, "why, Steve, it's half-past five. Seems to me that we ought to explore this vicinity a little. Here's a creek all right enough—how about that horse track? Does it point in or out of the water?"

"It's comin' out."

"All right. Now I'll ride across to see if there are any of those tracks in the mud on the other side." He soon returned with the information that although there was a mud bank on the other side, there were no recent horse tracks to be seen. "The man who rode that horse," continued Campbell, "must have come from that stream."

Larkin mounted his horse. "Let's ride up this crick a ways," he said; "when that horse come out of th' water, he come from up stream."

For a mile or more they rode up the stream, sometimes between precipitous banks which obliged them to keep to the water, again on the shore, on whose rocky pavement their horses' feet made no impression. Suddenly the valley ended in a canyon, with high, steep walls, into the upper end of which through a narrow ravine, flowed the mountain torrent. A moment's hesitation, and they rode boldly into the ravine, their well-trained horses struggling through the swift current, or scrambling from ledge to ledge at command; onward and upward until they came at last to a place where a broad, well-beaten path led to the water's edge. Evidences of the daily presence of cattle and horses at this drinking place were plenty, and the fact that men dwelt not far away was accentuated by the presence of several male undergarments, that had been washed and hung on the bushes to dry. "There's that wonderful red and blue handkerchief that Pedro wears," remarked Larkin, pointing to the articles; "they's no doubt o' that."

"There's no doubt of anything," returned Campbell. "All we need now is to get a good general idea of the layout of the buildings, and our work for the present is finished. I think we should take our horses farther up the ravine, conceal them and make a reconnaissance on foot."

Acting on the suggestion, the horses were hidden in a dense clump of evergreens, and their owners, creeping to the top of the hill, looked out upon a truly pastoral scene. A beautiful valley of perhaps one hundred acres lay before them—a well-watered, fertile valley, so hemmed in by mountain walls as to resemble the level bottom of a huge, extinct crater. At the southern end, and very near where the watchers lay, appeared the typical ranch buildings, long, low and tree-surrounded, the usual appurtenances of a

high-fenced corral and a huge haystack completing the scene in that direction. There were no signs of life, except for a small bunch of cattle that grazed at a distance, but presently a girl came to the door, and, turning her face toward the south, stood in a listening attitude.

"Nita all alone," whispered Campbell.

"I wish she'd turn her face this way," returned Larkin, "I'd like t' see it, so I'd know it next time we meet."

The girl re-entered the house, to appear presently equipped for a ride; she walked toward the outbuildings, from which she soon came, mounted, man-fashion, on a pony. As she rode directly toward them, the watchers had a good opportunity to study her face which was that of a Mexican girl of the common type. Despite her swarthy complexion, and rather squat figure, she possessed the dark, sensual beauty so much seen in women of her race. A great braid of coarse dark hair hung down her back, her cheeks glowed red through their swarth, and the eyes that looked from beneath the heavy brows were large and full of fire.

Looking neither to right or left, the girl rode straight down to the watering place, and turning to her right, went down to the bed of the stream, and out of sight.

"She has become impatient and has gone to meet her friends," Campbell said.

"Yes, I guess you're right about that," answered Larkin, rising to his feet, "and as Nita was home alone, it follers that now they's nobody home; this is our time to explore that little ranch."

"I suppose you realize the risk we run, if we venture out into the open," warned Campbell. According to Sampson, the gang at this time is divided into

four parties, one or more of which is liable to return at any minute.

"God hates a coward, and neither of us is that," urged Larkin, "I know we're runnin' some risk, but if we don't take this chanst, when will we git another? Are yeh with me?"

"Always," was the curt reply.

Leading their horses up the steep bank to the level, they mounted and rode rapidly round the buildings, taking mental note of all they saw; then getting near to the great encircling wall of rock, they made a circuit of the valley, searching closely as they rode for some appearance of a path or trail that might lead them to the outer world. The sun had gone down when, at the extreme north, they made out a rough trail running zigzag down the side of the mountain.

"The way out!" cried Dave, leaping from his horse, and leading it up the steep. Steve followed without a word, a rough scramble of several minutes bringing them to the top, whence they could view an immense expanse of country to the north and west. "We are from seventy-five to a hundred miles from Cotton Run," remarked Campbell, as they paused to rest their panting horses.

Larkin made a vague motion toward where the reflection of the setting sun was still to be seen. "That way?" he questioned.

"That way," replied his companion, and it's a long way at that; we must go into camp somewhere—where do you think?"

Larkin's eyes fell upon the well defined trail at his feet and glanced along to where it vanished in the dusk toward the northwest. "We musn't camp too clost t' this," he said, "ner we mustn't git too far from it either. Follerin' that trail by daylight is part of our biz'ness."

"Suppose, then, we cut over the top of the ridge here, trusting to luck to find water and grass in some quiet hollow or ravine."

"And come back to th' trail in th' mornin'," said Steve, rounding out the sentence.

"That's it; our horses are tired and the sooner they find food and rest, the sooner they will be ready for our journey to-morrow."

The ride of a mile over the broken, uneven country brought them to a miniature canyon, through which flowed a clear stream of pure water. Grass grew in abundance on its banks, and in this secluded spot the friends found a resting place, the haversack being soon exhausted of its contents, down to a package of salt that had been put in by the considerate Jinny; then they turned to and slept on the warm ground. Dawn found them astir, refreshed and ravenously hungry. Larkin hurried out to repicket the horses, laughing aloud in glee on his return, when he discovered his companion's occupation. Campbell was actually fishing, and already evidences of his luck were flapping about on the bank in the shape of a pair of plump mountain trout. "Fish for breakfast, Stephen," he cried, as he dexterously caught a cricket and impaled it on his hook. "It isn't chicken, this time."

"Where'd you git yer tackle?" queried Steve.

"Had it in my pocket. Haven't worn this coat since Rogers and I went fishing up to Blue Run last summer," snatching another half-pounder from the pool, "catch me some more crickets, old fellow—fish for breakfast, git a gait on you."

Larkin captured some insects, saying ruefully as he delivered them:

"What good's the fish goin' t' do us? We dassent light a fire here."

"It isn't good for boys to eat too early in the day.

Suppose we put the fish in your sack, and when we're far enough away, build a fire and broil them."

"How many shall we need?"

"That depends, I feel as if I could eat a barrel of them, but perhaps a half-dozen will suffice."

The quota of fish was soon obtained, and they hurried forth to find the trail, striking it without difficulty a half-mile from where they had left it on the night before; for an hour they followed its windings undisturbed, then while riding through a rocky, wooded defile, the long-drawn bawl of an ox and the voices of men came floating to them; they had scarcely time to conceal themselves in the undergrowth when a dozen cattle came up the trail driven by four as villainous-looking ruffians as ever cheated the gallows. The cattle bore different brands, among which Steve recognized that of Major Pike. Slowly the procession filed past, the men weary and haggard from their long night march, the steers lolling from exhaustion, and the tired horses scarcely able to carry their riders.

"Yank Flint and his part of the gang," said Campbell, when the party was safely out of sight and hearing, "that lanky fellow with the cropped head and the hooked nose was Yank. I've seen him a dozen times at Franklin; he's the worst unchanged rascal in Montana, and a man universally feared; he has contributed a dozen corpses to the graveyards of the territory, and he would have made sure of two more victims if our presence had been discovered. If our organization can get hold of and hang him alone, it will confer a lasting favor on the public."

"I have seen him once before," Steve remarked, "and I told him I'd be sure to meet him again."

"This gang seems to hev had some luck," he continued.

"O' yes, there is always more or less rustling go-

ing on, just to keep their hands in while waiting for an occasional big haul. A few stray head are taken from here and from there where they are least liable to be missed, but, my boy, they are on their way to their Waterloo now, and to you will belong the credit of breaking up the worst gang in Montana, You are a wonderfully clever fellow, Larkin."

"I never thought so," was the quiet response, "ev'rything seems t' hev come my way."

"And you have just kept 'em everlastingly coming, too," put in Campbell.

Some time during the forenoon the travelers ate their breakfast of broiled trout and salt, after which refreshing exercise their journey was pursued with so much industry that sundown found them dismounting at Guy Kent's stable.

CHAPTER XXV.

Leisurely the young men approached the house, talking earnestly as was their habit, taking note of nothing until they were within a few feet of the veranda, when Guy Kent's deep, pleasant voice called out:

"So you two fellers hev got through playin' hookey, and come home, eh? Well, we're glad t' see yeh; come up here and give account o' yerselves."

A glance showed the veranda chairs to be occupied not only by Mr. Kent and the two girls, but in an additional chair sat a stranger. A fine looking man of about fifty he was, tall, blond, one upon whom the years sat lightly, a gentleman in dress, manner and appearance. Campbell stopped short, gazing with dumb amazement into the stranger's eyes. Something of assurance he must have seen there, for with a bound he cleared the veranda and stood at the stranger's side.

"Father!" he cried, extending his hand. The other had risen from his chair, his fine face working with affectionate emotion; "My dear son," he said in a choking voice, taking the young man's hand in both of his own, "this is the happiest day of my life."

"You can be no happier than I am, father."

While they stood thus heart to heart, no further words were spoken, but in that eloquent silence the bitterness of years was swept away, leaving the father and son once more on the natural plane of mutual respect and affection.

Larkin was called up and introduced, which incident was followed by the evening meal, a function overflowing with reminiscence, anecdote and good cheer; then Kent and his young employee started out on a trip to the alfalfa field, the young ladies gave assistance to Jinny in the kitchen, leaving only the father and son tête-à-tête on the veranda.

"David, I have come for you," Mr. Campbell said.

"I thought as much, father; how did you know where to look for me?"

The father smiled. "You had not been gone three months before I knew where you were, and I have been watching you from a distance ever since."

Dave regarded his parent in wonder. "Why, father," he burst out, "how did you ever find it out?"

Mr. Campbell's smile broadened into a quiet laugh. "Major Pike and I were schoolmates," he said, "and have since remained very good friends. He knew I had a son of your name, and of about your age; when you had been in Rogers's employ a few weeks, he wrote of the fact, and has kept me posted regarding you ever since. I congratulate you on the character and the reputation you have attained, for I have seen your employer, and he verifies Pike's good opinion of you. As I said before, I have come to induce you to return with me."

"To go into your office?" the son queried, quickly.

"No, I mean to do better than that by you; knowing your bent, I have decided to humor it, and at the same time satisfy a whim of my own. I have bought one of the finest and largest ranches in Colorado, and have come, hoping that you will consent to become its superintendent; not as my employee, understand me, but as my son, my partner, and eventually my heir."

The son's eyes glowed, a flush of pleasure creeping up his tanned cheek; he leaned over and impulsively grasped his father's hand. "Father," he said, "you

have ever wished me well, and now you have offered me employment entirely congenial to my tastes. If you deem me competent, I will take charge of the ranch, but I cannot return with you at once; there are matters of importance connected with our lives and well-being about here that will probably keep me another month, perhaps longer; after that I will come."

"Very well, my son; let us say, then, the first of September."

A half hour was spent in discussing plans, all being satisfactorily arranged when later they were joined by the others.

Guy Kent, always the prince of entertainers, was at his best that evening; a pioneer in the cattle business, he had spent nearly a lifetime in making it a success, and now that success was assured, it was his delight to find an appreciative listener, forget all other topics, and talk about cattle by the hour. Such a listener he found in the elder Campbell, who was now more than ever anxious to get at the business side of ranching. To four young people, on a moonlit June evening, this everlasting theme grew monotonous.

Miss Manning stifled a yawn. "Is there much dew on the grass?" she asked, turning to Larkin.

"Scarcely any," was the reply. "We haven't had much dew lately."

"Is it considered dangerous about here to stroll out on such lovely evenings?"

"Not partic'larly dangerous, I guess."

"Then, why don't you and Mr. Campbell take us out for a walk, say as far as the top of the ridge?"

"O, Mar——" began Helen.

"Please don't interrupt me, dear; I am reminded of the signs we sometimes see in notion stores: 'If

you don't *see* what you want, ask for it.' I am dying for a walk out on the prairie."

"Large bodies move slow," Campbell quoted, with mock gravity. "Larkin and I would have got round to it had we been given time. Young ladies, get your wraps; we are at your service."

Slowly they strolled up the long slope, Campbell and Miss Manning taking the lead, their chattering voices and light laughter floating back to where Helen had fallen into place beside Steve. As was always the case when alone with this, to him, girl of all girls, this bold young man, whose very name was synonymous with courage, felt shy, awkward and nervous; there was a subject on which he wished to speak, but which was so far removed from this atmosphere of refinement, sentiment and sweet human interest, so sinister in its eventual outcome, that he hesitated to speak of it; he remembered, too, the part Helen was taking in the general plan, and felt keenly the humiliation to which she was being subjected. A bit of uneven ground caused his companion to stumble, and he involuntarily offered her the support of his arm; she accepted, and the contact gave him speech.

"When did Lawson go?" he asked.

"Late yesterday afternoon," after a little hesitation; "I doubt if he comes again; he was angry when he went."

Larkin understood. "Did he dare?" he asked in a low, hard voice.

"Don't question me, please," the girl said, with averted face. "I do not think he will seek my society again—I hope not; I have endured humiliation enough for a lifetime."

"There's no need of your endurin' more," Steve said earnestly. "We've run the game to cover. One time you said you was a daughter of the ranch, and

as such you have done your part. In less than a fortnight we'll rid the country of th' worst gang of rustlers that ever made a biz'ness of cattle-stealin'." The others were waiting for them then, and further conversation on the subject was dropped.

The Campbells left them early next morning, Larkin pausing beside his friend's horse long enough to remark, "Now, pass the word 'round and hev ev'ry boss ranchman from your way to Rogers's on Sat'd'y night. I'll take care of this end."

"They will be notified," was the quiet answer.

During the day Connally came in from the range. He immediately sought Steve at his work in the garden, and, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, said, "They're gone, Staven."

"What's gone, Mike?"

"Thim six steers that did be rinnin' in th' valley furninst th' spring by th' southaist thrail."

"That's a good ways from your station; how d'ye know they're gone?"

"Well, Staven, yer visit 'tother night roiled me up turrible. I slept noights wide awake thinkin' av ut, an' daytoimes whoile roidin' round th' cattle, I was pacin' up an' down wid me han's in me pockets studyin' how I c'ud help Staven wid th' big job he'd undhertook. Yestherday, whin I c'd sthand ut no longer, I rode over there, an' Staven, thim cattle was gone. I thracked 'em above a moile out an th' thrail, an' ther was harse tracks behind 'em all th' way; they wint be th' southaist thrail."

Steve looked at the honest Irishman in admiration. "Mike," he said, "I c'n trust you. I'll send someone out to take yer place Sat'd'y, and I want you to come to Rogers's place that night. Say nothin' to anybody, but come."

"Not askin' wan rayson, Staven, I'll be there."

For the next few days the young foreman of Cot-

ton Run ranch was silent and abstracted, the young ladies being much left to their own devices. Larkin had consumed one afternoon in a visit to Lorimer's place, whence a summons to the meeting at Rogers's was sent to other ranchmen.

Helen had planned a visit to Mrs. Pike, and on Friday, after breakfast, the buckboard, this time with Guy Kent himself as driver, stood at the door. Before Mr. Kent took his place in the wagon he was approached by his young employee. "Mr. Kent," Larkin said earnestly, "there's going to be a meetin' of ranchmen to Mr. Rogers's place to-morrow night; will yeh stop there on yer way back?"

Kent looked at him keenly. "Why, Stephen," he broke out, "I was cac'latin' on stoppin' over Sunday with Pike; now, what on airth——"

"Will you come if the Major does?" pleaded Steve.

"Hope yeh hain't barkin' up th' wrong tree, boy; yes, I'll come if Pike does."

The meeting at Rogers's ranch was a notable one. Men felt that something of unusual importance was in the wind, and every ranchman for fifty miles around was in attendance. Of employees, there were but Larkin, Campbell and Red Mike. When all were seated around the long table, Rogers opened the meeting.

"Ev'ry one o' you fellers knows yer welcome here," he said, "an' I'm tickled t' see yeh enny time. I ain't eggsactly clear as t' why this meetin' was called, but these two youngsters, Steve and Dave, hev got some sort of bee in their bunnits which seems t' be buzzin' terrible. Stephen, ez you're th' boss hornit, s'pose yeh tell us what we're here fur."

Intense interest was depicted on every face, and all eyes were turned curiously upon Larkin, who

rose slowly, his pale, determined face indicating the earnestness of his convictions.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you've be'n called together to hear that rustlin' has begun agin, and that Dave and I have located the gang." A moment to note the incredulity on the faces of his audience, and he continued: "The gang is not only located, but we know th' name of their leader, an' we c'n take yeh to his hidin' place."

"That's purty strong talk! Give his name," demanded Lorimer.

Larkin allowed his eyes to meet the steady gaze of Guy Kent. "His name," he announced, "is Lawson, and he claims t' come from Mizpah river way."

Kent started up, his honest old face blazing with indignation. "Ain't yeh 'shamed o' yerself, Stephen," he cried, "t' let yer dislike fur a feller carry yeh so fur! They ain't a finer young man in th' country'n Lawson. I didn't think it of yeh, boy."

Clear-headed old Rogers took a hand. "Mr. Kent," he exclaimed, "yeh c'n jes' bet th' boy's too level-headed not t' know what he's talkin' 'bout. I propose that we all let him hev his say, an' we take our'n after he's done."

There was a murmur of assent, and Kent subsided without a word, merely nodding to Steve to proceed.

"First I noticed," Larkin continued, "was the fact that Lawson was mighty fond o' runnin' round the country, gener'ly with a couple of his men. Somehow I got the idea that he was lookin' round fur nothin' good. After I had ketched him in two er three lies when th' truth'd answered any honest man, I got more convinced than ever. When I was in Chicago las' fall I found three of Mr. Kent's steers in a yard full of cattle bearin' dif'rent brands. They was th' triplets that Mike, here, always called the

'Three Graces.' I learnt from their owner that they hed be'n brought to a shippin' station in Wyoming from a feller who bought 'em up in Montana, and drove 'em down. I got his description, and it tallied with my man. Settin' in th' smoker comin' home, they was three men in front of me playin' cards; one of 'em was th' feller you took th' gun away from when we was comin' home on th' Queen, Mr. Kent. Well, it wasn't very long 'fore they begun t' talk cattle, blamin' Lawson 'cause he was so slow 'bout makin' a good big haul; they left th' car soon after that, but I learn't somethin' while they was there. Durin' th' winter there was nothin' goin' on, but lately, when I heard that Lawson and his men was nosin' round agin, I made up my mind that they was lookin' over th' ground 'fore they made a big strike. I rode out and talked to Mike, and las' Sat'd'y I told Dave all I knowed; then him and me took a ride."

He then gave a detailed account of the Sunday's trip already recorded, at times referring to Campbell for the corroboration that was always forthcoming, winding up his modest narrative by asking Connally to tell what he knew. This Mike did in characteristic language, ending his harangue with the expressed desire: "Whin we gits 'em, gintlemin, lave me at thot dang Bull; it's a grudge I'm owin' him anney-way, an' whin I gits through wid him, there won't be a hull bone in his dang schkin' that won't be clane broke."

Of the listeners, Rogers was first to speak. "Dave," he said, "hev you ennything t' add?"

"Not a word," came the terse reply. "Steve has told it all, and every word he has spoken is true."

Guy Kent arose, and, stalking across the floor to where Larkin stood, grasped his hand. "Stephen," he said in tones that expressed his humility, "fur-

give me. Old Guy ust t' think he knowed something, but that day hes gone by, I guess. I'm a bigger fool than I ever thought I was."

There was a quiet after a little, a grave, stern, foreboding quiet. Then Rogers called for opinions as to the best mode of procedure. Larkin, when appealed to, settling all disputes and outlining a general plan when he said: "They've be'n out on a prospectin' tour lately and they're likely to all be to home restin' out. The eighteen or twenty head they took in with 'em ain't likely t' be missed, and they won't be lookin' fur a raid. Now's our time. Let ev'ry man that c'n be spared off th' ranges, round up to Cotton Run to-morrow night. We'll divide our men in two parties. Dave'll lead one and I the other. 'Fore daylight both parties'll be ready to rush in, and as Mr. Kent said one time, 'th' circus'll begin'."

Beyond mutual promises to be on hand at the rendezvous, little more was said, the stern, determined men riding off in different directions to prepare for the most desperate encounter of their lives.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Dusk of Sunday evening found forty well-mounted, well-armed men in the stable yard at Guy Kent's ranch. There was little time for discussion or conversation, for a long, hard ride was before them. The two guides set their watches exactly alike, and twenty men were told off to each party. "At half-past three we must be there, an' ready to strike," said Captain Rogers, addressing them all; "the party that gits there first must show a small light which will be answered by th' other. Major Pike, are yeh ready t' move?"

"Awaiting orders, captain," and the Major's hand sought his forehead in the old, well-remembered salute.

"Forward!" and two-score determined men moved at the word, twenty commanded by Rogers and guided by Campbell to take the path down the river and over the mountains, twenty in charge of Major Pike, with Larkin as guide, to traverse the southeast trail.

The moon came up and assisted in showing the ways along which the silent horsemen rode in single file like the ghosts of an avenging army. There were no accidents, no incidents, the party guided by Larkin arriving at the dugway by the stream just as the first gray glimmerings of dawn were coming on. The guide consulted his watch: "Three o'clock."

Soon he crept to the top of the bank, and, taking a parlor match from his pocket, drew it along his

thigh. A bright flame sprang up, which was answered by a tiny point of light away to the northwest. The guide crept back to his companions.

"They're there," he whispered. "Three twenty-five!" and they could distinguish Rogers's men picking their way down the steep trail and spreading out like a great fan, riding at a gallop toward the buildings. "Three thirty," and Pike's command came as one man from the ravine, completing the surrounding cordon as they swung to east and south. As yet not a sound or a sign of life came from the ranch buildings. The circle of avengers was drawing close when a dog set up a terrific barking.

A face appeared at a window, and a revolver shot rang out on the instant. "Close in!" shouted Rogers, and every man set his face toward the house, from which shots were coming at intervals. Though surprised, the rustlers evidently meant to die hard. As yet not a bullet had found a mark, nor had the besiegers fired a shot; neither had they seen a half-clad man ride bareback from an outbuilding outside the circle, and, bending low over his horse's neck, make for the pass at the ravine. He had nearly attained his object when Pike observed him and yelled: "Lawson! Take him, dead or alive." A shower of bullets fell round the fugitive or whistled past his ears, but not one seemed to touch him, nor of his half-dozen pursuers was but one successful in intercepting him, a young man riding a gray horse.

A fiendish smile of recognition and an oath on the part of Lawson, the crack of two revolvers and the ruffian escaped down the ravine where pursuit was impossible. Steve was swaying in his saddle when Campbell rode to his side. "Larkin, are you hurt?" he cried.

A wan smile flitted over Larkin's face and the

bridle rein dropped from his fingers. "Help me down, Dave," he gasped. "I guess I'm done fur."

Gently Campbell lifted him to the ground, and tore the clothing from his chest. An inch above, and to the left of the heart, appeared a small, blue-edged hole from which a few drops of blood oozed. "What d'ye think of it?" the wounded man asked calmly.

"Think it's a good thing it wasn't lower down; you're worth a dozen dead men; what can I do for you?"

"Guess yeh can't do nothin'. They're shootin' purty lively over there. Mebbe they'll need yeh."

"Then they must do without me. Remember our compact, Steve?"

The sound of shots and shouts and of crashing wood gradually diminished until, save for the babble of voices, all was still. Two men came running across the turf to where Campbell supported his friend's head on his knee. They were Guy Kent and Major Pike. The old man was half-crazy with grief and anxiety, but by exercise of strong self-control concealed his feelings, his brusque speech being sadly at variance with his pale, drawn face and trembling hands.

"Got yeh, didn't he, th' tarnal skunk!" he cried, "and saved his own durn skin, too, that's th' worst of it. Did he plug yeh bad, Stephen? Keep yer eye on th' gun, now, boy, keep yer eye on th' gun, an, never say die. Is't hurtin' yeh much?"

"I don't mean t' die, if I c'n help it," the boy said with a smile, and in so hopeful a tone that the old man's face brightened.

"That's the talk, Stephen, but hevin' said it, don't say it agin. I don't doubt but what yeh'll come 'round all right. Major, you've hed some experience in this kind of thing, see what yeh think of his hurt."

Major Pike examined the wound, and, tenderly slipping his hand round to Steve's back, looked up with an air of relief. "It is not necessarily a fatal wound," he announced, "the bullet went clear through him, so there will be no probing for it. In the army I have known many such to recover. Let us carry him down to the stream; it is shady there, and bathing the wound with cold water will do it no harm."

In the cool shade by the pool they made him comfortable, and the two older men returned to the scene of the late strife.

A victory the ranchmen had won, but at a cost of blood and life. Poor Matt Toby was still, shot through the heart by Yank Flint, and one of Richardson's men lay beside him with a blue mark near his temple. Lorimer's left arm was broken, and there were several flesh wounds in the party. The young ruffian whom Steve had recognized on the train died at the hands of Rogers, and a Mexican desperado had gone to keep him company. Eight living rustlers, more or less wounded, were securely bound and awaiting the short trial given on like occasions. Pedro, the Mexican, and the girl were missing. Evidences of guilt were everywhere rife. In the corral were found cattle bearing the brands of nearly every ranchman there. Flint's pocket contained Dandy Pete's watch, and on the finger of another was found his diamond ring. It is scarcely necessary to go into the details of the short, decisive trial, or to describe the carrying out of the sentence planned beforehand. By noon of that day eight corpses swung from the branches of a nearby tree, and night witnessed twelve new graves on a knoll where before there had been but one. When life was over, cowboy and rustler slept side by side.

While these exciting scenes were being enacted, Campbell never left his friend's side.

Toward evening a consultation was held, the counsel of Major Pike being accepted. "Larkin must be taken straight to my house," he said. "Mrs. Pike is the best nurse in the world, and if anyone can pull him through, she can. We must make a comfortable litter and carry him every step of the hundred or more miles. Aleck, take the best horse you can find in the stable here, and ride against time to Franklin. Have the doctor meet us at Richardson's ranch, which we ought to reach by to-morrow evening. In the meantime I took the precaution to bring with me some simple remedies with which we will dress the wound and make him as comfortable as possible. Mr. Kent, select four of the best men for bearers; you and Campbell go along as attendants. I will overtake you before you reach Richardson's ranch. Lorimer, you and the boys that are hurt had better get to a doctor as quickly as possible.

Tenderly they lifted the wounded youth and bore him away through the cool, dewy night. "Tramp, tramp, tramp," they went, over mountain, valley and plain, the bearers taking turns at their labor of love. Gentle old Kent and the deft-handed Campbell always at the litter's side ready to offer assistance or encouragement. The patient stood the journey well, seeming to suffer little pain, most of the time being spent in sleep.

At Richardson's Major Pike overtook the party, and, while awaiting the arrival of the surgeon, gave an account of the closing scenes at the rustlers' rendezvous. "We gathered up what was worth saving," he said, "and set fire to the buildings. The boys started homeward with the plunder, the cattle and the horses this morning. To satisfy their curiosity, some of the boys opened a lonesome grave we found out there on the knoll. It contained the body of a woman, not long dead."

Campbell nodded.

"Nita!" he exclaimed.

"Very likely," the Major continued, "and it is probable that the sequel to another crime lies buried in that grave. We have done our work well, however, and I doubt if cattle stealing ever gets a hold in this country again."

The doctor came and gave a hopeful opinion of his patient. "There is no inward bleeding," he announced, "for although the ball passed through his lungs, it seems not to have touched any considerable blood vessel. It is bleeding some, which is a good thing. Get him home and in bed as soon as possible. Barring the danger of blood-poisoning, and with good nursing, he should recover."

Major Pike rode ahead to prepare quarters for the invalid, the evening of the third day witnessing the sturdy, tireless bearers file down the long slope leading to Pike's Landing and up to the wide veranda, where stood three tender, sympathetic women, eager to nurse the stricken man back to health and strength.

Mrs. Pike had the patient taken into her coolest, best chamber, and the long fight for life began. Notwithstanding the doctor's assurance that no vital part had been touched, the long, hot July days developed inflammation, followed by fever and delirium, days in which the brave young soul wandered close to the dark beyond, but loving hands, assisted by his own splendid manhood, held him back until gradually a change for the better came. During these trying days Campbell, placing himself under the orders of Mrs. Pike, scarcely left the bedside of his friend, and Guy Kent's life was a continual pilgrimage between Pike's Landing and Cotton Run.

"I scarcely thought the Lord would let him die," the royal old fellow said, when told that most of the

danger was past, "I've be'n in many a tight fix in my life, and tho' I hain't be'n noted fur preachin' very much, I've always hed faith in Him, and He's never furgot me; now when I'm gittin' 'long purty night to t' divide, I didn't think He'd take my boy away from me, and they was always some comfort in th' thought that ef He was goin' t' take him, He'd a chose a fitter instrument than that ornary skunk, Lawson, to do it."

Twice, during his worst days, Larkin had called for Helen, and she had come, in her calm, quiet way, to place her soft, cool hands on his brow and soothe him into restful sleep; then to depart, quietly as she had come, leaving to the keenest observer, had there been such, not the faintest suspicion of her real sentiments toward him who had called forth her gentle ministrations; she came often, as convalescence drew on, bringing Miss Manning with her, the two amusing him with their pleasant chatter, or by singing old-fashioned duets that they knew he liked; never had patient a pleasanter coming back to life, and he often marveled greatly at the many kindnesses he received. There came a day when he was permitted to dress, and Campbell supported him to a chair out on the shady veranda. "You will excuse me, old man," the latter said, when he was comfortably fixed, "but Miss Manning and I have planned an excursion to an Indian camp down the river a bit, but as Miss Fiske is to keep you company, I don't think you will suffer from our absence."

Larkin watched his friends ride out of sight and turned to his companion with the commonplace remark: "What a fine lookin' couple they make."

Helen let her work drop into her lap and looked in the direction indicated. "Yes," she replied, "and in their case looks are the least of it; they are both of them what they seem."

There was a tinge of bitterness in the young man's tone when he spoke again. "They're 'specially adapted to each other's society," he declared. "They're both young, have plenty of money, and both have the advantage of a good education. A man like myself, that's got neither one, but would like to have both, is in a bad fix."

Miss Fiske turned on him briskly. "Your chances to obtain money," she said, with a touch of impatience in her tones, "is as good as any man's, and at your age you may yet secure an education. Did you ever think of that?"

Larkin lifted his head and a torrent of words came from his eager lips. "Have I ever thought of it?" he repeated, "thought of it! It is always in my mind, I guess. I've always knowed I could earn money, and I mean to do *that*. I never realized my lack of education till lately—sence I've met you; if I thought I might climb up to your level, I'd spend half a lifetime tryin' to get there. Oh! Helen, if I might dare to hope."

"Letters!" called a cheery voice, and Major Pike, having just returned from the station, came from within with his hands full of envelopes. "Three for you, Miss Helen, and two for—why, where's Miss Mary?" Manlike, the Major observed nothing unusual, and the girl, under the pretence of reading her letters in private, ran away to hide her blushing cheeks and calm her bounding pulse. "Major Pike might have stayed away just a little longer," she said to herself pettishly. Ah, then, this was no one-sided love affair, after all.

"Father has sent for me," Miss Manning announced that evening at table. "A cousin from the east is on, he says, and I must come at once. There is also an invitation for you, Nell, to spend the re-

mainder of our vacation at my home. Of course you will come."

"Perhaps Uncle——" Helen began.

"We'll see what uncle says. A good share of my belongings are still at Cotton Run, and I must start for there to-morrow to do my packing."

Larkin was not at table, and knew nothing of the arrangement until the following morning, when Campbell informed him. "I am to take the girls to Cotton Run," he said, "and the start for the east will be from Franklin City."

Steve's face clouded. "Is she sure to go?" he asked.

"Is *she* sure to go?" Campbell repeated, "certainly; her people sent for her, and——" He stopped and reddened as he noted the peculiar smile on his friend's face, "you think you're very clever, don't you? Never mind, Steve, we're both in the same boat, I reckon."

The young ladies came to bid the invalid good-bye, Mary to offer her hand with cool, frank graciousness. "You will be sure to come to Chicago before the year is out," she said, "and you'll not fail to call on us?"

He promised eagerly, turning to Helen, who warmly seconded the invitation, and who now came forward to say her words of farewell. If the girl had more than a friendly regard for him, she had herself under perfect control, and the man who loved her met the issue bravely. "Good-bye," she said, in her self-contained way, "we shall hope to see you before many months." And "Good-bye" was his commonplace reply, though his heart was beating painfully, "I hope so."

Two days later the friends on the veranda at Pike's Landing caught a glimpse of two smiling faces as the eastbound express went flying by, and

two fluttering handkerchiefs waved farewell. To one person there it seemed as though the sun had gone down at noonday.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A hot, dry summer rang the changes over the range country. The grass, which had been so green in the early springtime, had withered into sapless brown tufts, and the swales, whereon the ranchmen had before gathered their supply of wild hay, gave meager promise. The great field of alfalfa at Cotton Run had yielded a fair first cutting, after which the coarse stubble stood stiff and naked, like so much bristling wire, save in depressions here and there, where a few spindling stems struggled up. With the means for irrigating at hand, and second cutting an absolute necessity, still Guy Kent would do nothing until his beloved Stephen should come to superintend the work.

Thus it happened that early August found the lad, still thin and weak, but rapidly regaining strength, back at his post of duty. Ranchmen came many miles to witness the first opening of the ditches, and one of the proudest moments of Larkin's life was when, sitting on the back of Gray Don midway in the field, he fired his revolver as a signal to let the water into the main ditch; watched it spout from the many laterals along the line, saw it trickle slowly down the long slope and disappear into the thirsty soil. Guy Kent entertained his visitors at table that night and Jinny taxed her ingenuity to the utmost to provide a supper worthy of the occasion. When the meal was over, the old ranchman produced from somewhere **more than one** dust-covered bottle of rare old wine.

"Uncork them bottles, Peter," he said, "and fill the glasses all 'round. Barrin' th' sudden takin'-off of poor Matt, this is th' most joyous occasion we've hed in menny a day. That I ain't much on speech-makin' yeh all knôw, but I've got a few words t' say, and a toast t' propose to'night, th' which I guess yeh'll all indorse. Take it all in all, most fellers hes got t' watch fur chances t' hev downright, solid injoyment in this world. Th' man that said 'yesterday we *hev* hed, to-morrow we *may* hev, but to-day we've *got*' knowed what he wus talkin' about. Most of us fellers here hev seen more yisterdays than we'll see to-morrers, but we're all here t'night, and t' my mind we've got an extry good right t' rejoice and be glad. Fur years we've be'n blunderin' along, th' innocent and unsuspectin' victims of thieves, murderers and rustlers. We didn't hev gumption enough t' ferret out and punish th' guilty men, but jes' sot down and let 'em hev ther way. We seemed t' be waitin' fur some Moses er other t' deliver us frum bondage. Wa'al, he come along after a while. He detected our enemies and led the way to their hidin' place. In doin' us this great favor, he come near losin' his life, but, thank God, he's be'n spared to meet with us to-night. So, I say agin, we've an extry reason t' be glad and merry. Git on yer legs, men, and drink t' the long life and happiness of Stephen Larkin, th' bravest and best young man in Montana."

Poor Larkin put down his untasted wine, and sank back in his chair trembling and abashed, while the toast was drunk, and during the din of the rousing cheer that followed; then he arose, and with a bright red spot burning on each thin cheek, faced the company, as he said:

"I wouldn't be much of a man if I didn't thank yeh, Mr. Kent, and all th' rest of you men fur yer

good opinion of me, but I want to say right here that I don't deserve half th' credit yeh're givin' me. Dave, here——"

Campbell seized his friend by the coat, and, drawing him back into his chair, took the floor in his place.

"Sit down, Steve," he cried. "You are weak yet, and scarcely know what you're talking about. Gentlemen, Mr. Kent has placed the credit where it belongs—I only followed where Mr. Larkin led. (Another cheer.) I say, for the best and bravest boy in Montana——"

Amid the uproarious din Larkin subsided, making no further attempt to speak, but listened with quiet appreciation to what the others had to say, until Campbell bore him off to bed.

August dragged its sweltering length along, the coming of the last days bringing Campbell to say good-bye. Larkin was away somewhere on the ranch, and Guy Kent took advantage of his absence to have a confidential interview with Dave. "Come to my room, Dave," he said, "I'm glad Stephen's away, fur I want to talk t' yeh, an' I don't want t' hear th' kick that th' boy'd put up if he knowed what I'm goin' to do."

Kent opened his desk, and, selecting a pen, wrote laboriously for a moment, while Campbell waited, wondering what the old man was going to do. "Dave," he said finally, "Stephen hes done a lot fur me an' I want t' do somethin' fur him. Here's my check fur five thousand dollars, drawn to yer father's order. He's got some minin' property that's payin' big dividends, an' I want this money invested in Stephen's name in them shares. I ain't givin' this to th' boy, only lendin' it to him; 'thout him knowin' it. I expect him to pay me back ev'ry dollar, with interest, if he ever kin, which I'll take th' resk of.

I want it understood that he's to know nothin' 'bout it, an' that I'm t' act as a sort o' trustee fur him till I git ready to tell him m'self."

Campbell placed the bit of paper in his pocket-book. "I will do exactly as you say, Mr. Kent," Campbell promised, "and father will do what is right by Steve, you may rest assured."

Late in the afternoon Larkin returned, and in the dusk of early evening rode far out on the trail to bid his friend good-bye. The constant companionship of nearly three years had endeared them greatly to each other, and both keenly regretted the parting that was now so near.

"I wish you weren't going, Dave," Steve said simply.

"I feel exactly the same way myself, old fellow," was Campbell's response. "A good many things have happened to us since I shot that hole in your hat, haven't they?"

Larkin gave a low laugh. "I've often thought, sence I've known yeh better, how I might've got left if I'd tried to lick yeh that day," he said.

"That's a question that will never be answered," Campbell commented. "It's a thing of the past, and I'd rather speak of the future. What are your plans? Are you going to remain here as an employee indefinitely?"

"I don't know," came the slow answer, "there's a good deal to be considered. I'm contented here, but don't think I'd like t' work for someone else always. My father and mother ain't very old yit, but they will be, some day, and I've always promised my mother to make a home fur her; if I'm spared to do it, it will be made wherever she'd like best t' live. Yeh'll remember, Dave, that I ain't got prospects, like you hev. I've got to make 'em, if I ever hev enny."

Campbell's voice assumed a bantering tone. "My dear young friend," he said, "please allow me to make a suggestion likely to greatly improve your prospects. Why don't you marry Miss Helen, and make yourself solid as Mr. Kent's nephew, and, in course of time, his heir?"

"Dave!" Larkin's voice rang out full of honest anger. "I won't stand ev'rything even from my best friend. Take care! How kin you banter me in these last few minutes we've got together?"

"I was never more in earnest in my life," Campbell said, gravely, "I had no intention of angering you, and sincerely beg your pardon if I've done so; but, old fellow, the eyes of friendship are sharp. I have noticed for a long time your growing fondness for Mr. Kent's niece, and your good taste does you credit. Try as you might, you could not conceal the fact. And I think your cause is not hopeless. Mary says——"

"Mary!" cried Steve, with explosive energy.

"Yes, Mary," Campbell returned coolly. "I had intended telling you all about it before we parted, but for all that her name slipped out unawares. You see, I've thought a lot of Miss Manning ever since I met her at Silver Sands, and it seems that all along she has not been indifferent to me. That ride we took to the Indian camp, while you were convalescing at Major Pike's brought things to a focus, and, well we are engaged to be married. To me she is the sweetest and best woman in the world."

Larkin leaned from his saddle and clasped his friend's hand, his simple, unaffected loyalty showing itself in his hearty voice as he said: "From the bottom of my heart I congratulate yeh, Dave. Yeh're deservin' of the best woman on earth."

For some little distance they rode along in silence, each busy with his own thoughts, then Steve asked in

a voice scarcely audible: "What did Miss Manning say, Dave?"

"Oh, yes! well, she said that Helen was a close-mouthed sort of person who never spoke of her personal affairs even to her dearest friends; but notwithstanding that, if she, Mary, was any judge of human nature, or woman nature, rather, you stood high in Helen's estimation, if not in her affections."

There was a thread of hopeless incredulity in Larkin's tone when he spoke again. "It's no use, Dave," he said. "Of course, I thank you and Miss Manning fur yer good opinion of me, and there's no use of me denyin' to yeh my feelin's toward Miss Helen; but yeh must both of yeh be mistaken. It can't be, that she, who hes ev'rything, beauty, wealth an' education, and who c'n take her pick from among men of her own class, would ever give a thought to a poor feller like me, with nothin' to recommend him but middlin' steady habits, good health an' a purty thorough knowledge of range life and its duties. Yeh're mistaken, Dave!"

"Your humility is admirable, Steve," Campbell returned gently, "but a habit of under-rating oneself is not a good one to acquire. Women of Helen's make-up are sure to overlook mere superficial qualities where they see true worth. Your prospects may be better than you know. Take heart, my boy, go in and win."

Evidently the subject was painful to Larkin, for his next remark changed its trend. "When are yeh to be married, Dave?" he asked.

"O, not for a long time yet. Mary must finish her education, and I must establish myself in the world before the important event. Promise me one thing, Steve, that when it does come off, I can depend on your presence."

Steve gave a ready promise, the conversation then

drifting into other channels until the time for parting came. Then they separated with mutual expressions of affection and good will, Campbell to seek Rogers's ranch for his last night there, Larkin to ride slowly along the back trail, his mind full of conflicting emotions.

* * * * *

Autumn brought its duties to the once more strong and vigorous Larkin. The gathering and stacking of the alfalfa, the harvesting of the immense corn crop and the duties of the fall round-up bringing in their train both diversion and employment. Although he greatly missed the cheerful companionship of Campbell, his frequent letters, full of hope and promise, were a source of comfort, and an occasional, breezy, friendly missive from Helen cheered his hours of toil and kept alive the vague, faint hope he cherished in his secret heart.

The destruction of Lawson's band of rustlers had had a salutary effect upon the range country. Although their leader was still at large with a reward upon his head, the summary vengeance which had been dealt out by the ranchmen precluded any idea that a similar band of lawbreakers would soon, if ever, be organized.

Relieved of this menace, ranchmen took new heart. Farther away than ever before the cattle roamed in security. The important subjects of improvement by breeding and selection of the fittest were paramount over all others when cattlemen met, and, where water was available, proprietors were preparing to follow Guy Kent's lead in irrigation.

To Larkin Guy Kent gave all credit, often saying, "I couldn't run my ranch 'thout Stephen."

The time came, however, all too soon for the good old ranchman, when he was obliged to yield his favorite to a prior claim. One chill November evening

when Larkin came in from the range Guy Kent handed him a yellow envelope with the remark: "A telegraft fur yeh, Stephen. Lorimer happened t' be in Franklin when it come, and he rode this way t' fetch it."

Steve received the envelope with a sudden grip at his heart. The frequent letters he received from his mother, full of affectionate regard and always ending with the stock phrase, "Father and I are very well," were always expected, but the yellow mystery he held in his hand filled him with apprehension. He opened it with trembling fingers turning, a moment after, a grave face to Guy Kent. "My father's dying," he said, "and mother wires me to come home at onc't. I must take the first train out of Franklin to-morrow."

The old man took an involuntary step toward him. "Yeh'll come back, won't yeh, Stephen?" he asked wistfully.

"That will depend on circumstances, Mr. Kent. In enny event I'll do what's best. Father and mother must be th' first consideration; after them comes my own an' my friends' int'rests."

The old man was silent for a moment, his voice sounding strangely husky when he spoke again. "Furgive me, Stephen," he said, "I guess I'm gittin' selfish in my old days. Yeh spoke out that time like I'd hed yeh if yeh'd be'n my own son; as y' can't be that, let me occupy th' place of bein' yer best friend."

Long into the night the two men sat talking, the younger leaving all his interests and affairs in charge of his benefactor, and when they parted next day at the station it was with mutual expressions of good will, and with promises to meet again.

CHAPTER XXI.

At the Fulda railway station, situated well toward the eastern part of New York State, on an Indian summer day in November, stood a lazily contented farm horse hitched to a worn and old-fashioned buggy. In the vehicle sat a stout and equally old-fashioned looking individual whose present business seemed to be to manipulate a big chew of tobacco. He spat regularly at a point on the ground exactly four feet from the "nigh" front wheel, and from time to time cast anxious glances up the railroad track, whence he seemed to be expecting something. The "something" appeared presently, a passenger train, from which alighted a few travelers, among them a tall young man who was noticeable on account of his stalwart figure, a face tanned as brown as a berry and on whose well-shaped head a broad-brimmed white felt hat sat jauntily. The young man glanced up and down the platform until his eyes rested on the figure in the wagon, which he approached with rapid strides.

"How are you, Pete?" he asked, with easy familiarity.

The old fellow's jaw dropped in astonishment, and for once old Pete Bannister forgot to masticate his weed, gazing in open-mouthed wonder at the stranger. "Say," he gasped, at last, yeh ain't Steve Larkin, be yeh? Ef yeh be, I've come fur yeh."

"I'm certainly Steve Larkin, and I expected some one to answer my wire and come fur me. How's my father, Pete?"

Bannister's face grew serious.

"He ain't no better, Steve," he said. "He's hed a stroke an's goin' fast; sed this mornin' he only waited fur yeh to come 'fore he died. Bless me, Steve, how yeh've growed! I wouldn't hev knowed yeh."

Larkin sprang into the wagon.

"Hurry!" he almost commanded. Nor did the old gossip obtain from the silent, preoccupied young man any further conversation on the trip to the farmhouse, to retail to his ever ready listeners at the village store that evening.

In the silent watches of that night, with his nerveless hand clasped in his son's palm, John Larkin rallied to speak his last words. "I have been hard and narrow and selfish, my son," he said with labored breath. "I erred through ignorance, I guess, not knowin' how to choose the best. Forgive me, boy, and promise to take good care of mother when I'm gone."

Steve drew his weeping mother to his side, and, putting his arm around her, said: "I hev forgot all our diff'rences long ago, father, and I promise to care for mother while I live."

The sick man was silent for a moment, then he whispered to his son:

"Get the Bible, and read the twenty-third Psalm."

The son obeyed, reading the soothing words of David's beautiful rhapsody in a low, distinct voice, his mother kneeling by the bedside; when he had finished, he glanced at the face on the pillow, and knew that his father had gone hence.

Ten days later Guy Kent received a letter from his late young employee having this conclusion: "There's nothing I'd like better than to come back to Montana, and I mean to do so some day, but there's much to see to here, it is my mother's home

and at present I must stay here to care for her and her interests."

* * * * *

For three years Larkin toiled on the home farm, spending the long winter evenings in reading and study; working patiently alone for self advancement. He was the idol of his mother's heart and she seemed to grow young again under his thoughtful care. Yet, though respected and highly esteemed by all who knew him, Steve was not happy, and he longed for the free, open life of the range. He was in constant communication with Guy Kent, who kept him posted on affairs at Cotton Run, but from Helen he never heard directly. He had written her soon after his father's death, telling her of his hopes and ambitions, but as the time went on, bringing him no reply, he concluded that she did not care for him, not once guessing at the thing that had really happened to his letter, which was that the neighbor to whom he had entrusted it for mailing had dropped it through the lining of his rainy-day overcoat, where it may remain until this day.

Through her uncle, he learned that she had been graduated from school and had taken various trips about the country with Miss Manning, but most of her time had been spent at home, or at Pike's Landing. Once Kent hinted that a certain young lieutenant in the army, a nephew of Mrs. Pike's, stood in high favor, and poor Larkin, whose love burned with an unquenchable fire, felt for a time that life was no longer worth living, rallying only by force of will and under the goad of the bitter thought:

"What a fool I am! I've no right to even feel miser'ble about her. She's as far above me as the stars are above the earth, and I might as well wish for a star as to wish for her." So, harboring the delusion that he had driven her image from his heart,

he labored on, doing with a will whatever came to him to do, studying and reading as he never had done before, unconscious yet conscious that the whole trend of his life had been changed by his love.

Frequent letters from Campbell, full of stories of the life he had left, and of his present successes, sometimes caused him hours of discontented longing, yet he did not waver in what he thought was his duty toward his mother; to stay by her on the old farm and care for her.

The coming of the third autumn brought a short, exciting letter from Guy Kent. "They've run Lawson into his hole," the ranchman wrote, "tho' I sca'cely think they'd got him so soon if Helen hadn't winged him first. They've got him caged up to Franklin, charged with attempt to kill and fur cattle stealin'. We'll see yeh soon, fur yeh kin bet yer life they'll be a supeen' left fur yeh to appear ag'in him."

Over the phrase: "If Helen hadn't winged him," Steve pondered a great deal. He expected Lawson to be taken sooner or later, but that Guy Kent's niece should have been an important factor in the outlaw's capture, through "winging" him, aroused the liveliest curiosity and solicitude in his mind. He wrote Kent asking an explanation, to which he received only the unsatisfactory reply: "Yeh'll be out here bimeby, 'tendin' the trial; then yeh'll hear all about it."

That Helen had been called upon to defend herself from bodily harm, Larkin felt sure, and he waited anxiously the coming of the legal summons that would take him to Montana. Before the close of the month a sheriff's officer from Franklin county, Montana, called upon him at his home, and left a formidable looking legal document, citing him to appear at the supreme court to sit in Franklin City.

crisp sharpness of a Montana New Year's morning they alighted from the train at Franklin City, she had regained her usual degree of peace and content.

As they walked toward the hotel, where a team from Cotton Run was to meet them, Steve gazed in wonder at the improvements about him. During his three years' absence the rude frontier town had been transformed into as quiet and orderly a little city as even New England could boast. Whole rows of neat houses appeared where he had last seen irregular strings of rude shanties, a fine brick opera house occupied the site of the shambling old wooden theatre, there were churches, a fine new schoolhouse, the main streets were well paved, the sidewalks graveled, and a blue-coated policeman strolled leisurely along where before one had been wont to meet lawless characters of every description.

The trip had been made in a sleeping-car and Larkin was pleased to note how strong and fresh his mother appeared after the long journey. Mother and son were nearing the finish of an excellent breakfast when the whirr of wheels on the frozen ground drew Steve's attention to the window. A pair of dashing grays hitched to a light surrey were flying down the street, and on the driver's seat, wrapped in a great fur coat, erect, colossal, his eyes shining with an eager light, his great beard floating in the wind, and holding the reins in a grip of steel was dear old Guy Kent.

Mrs. Larkin never forgot the scene that followed Kent's coming into the breakfast room.

"First time I ever saw two men re'lly hug each other," the widow afterwards said. "My son seemed willin' enough to be hugged, and Mr. Kent, in his big fur coat, looked enough like a bear to make it natural for him to want to squeeze somethin'."

"But, Stephen, they're so wild, and what Mr. Poole calls 'woolly' out there."

"Bill's an idiot!" the son blurted impetuously; "that is to say, Mother, Mr. Poole don't know what he's talkin' about."

"But they're not law abiding out there, son," the widow maintained. "They carry revolvers in their belts and in their boots to shoot each other on slight provocation, and they hang men for stealin' cattle, don't they?"

"Such things have happened," Steve admitted, "but, Mother, that was when they were matters of necessity and such things don't occur now. The people of Montana are to-day just as law-abiding as are those of York state."

"But they live in ranches and log houses and shacks and things, don't they, Stephen?"

"They live comfortably and have all they want, Mother."

"Then there's cyclones in summer and blizzards in winter, aren't there?"

"It's liable to storm anywhere, an' one never knows what may happen either here or there. Come with me, Mother."

Remonstrance against her son's strong arguments were of little avail to one who had always been accustomed to yielding, and Mrs. Larkin finally gave a reluctant consent to Stephen's plans. The farm implements and live stock were sold along with the old farm that had been their home for so many years. The arrangements were all closed quickly and the widow finally took her seat in the car, westward bound, but with the air of one who was about to go to her execution. In comparison with Steve's first trip west, theirs was a short journey; a wonderful one for the woman who had never before been fifty miles away from home, and when in the

kin, fatigued by her long journey, had sought her rest; the Pikes had gone to their room; the various employees had taken themselves off to their quarters, and old Guy Kent was outside bidding his guests Godspeed on their night's ride, Steve and Helen still sat at the piano as they had done in years gone by.

He watched her in silence as her hands wandered idly up and down the keyboard, her fair hair reflecting the lamplight which fell full upon a face replete with strength, character and sweet womanhood. In that attitude he had seen her before, and he waited for the words that he knew would follow. She turned presently with a question: "Have you been prosperous and happy, since you went away?"

"Fairly prosperous, but scarcely happy," he replied, a little drearily. "One can make himself prosperous, but to make himself happy, is another thing. And, you?" he asked, "tell me of yourself. I have known but little of your life for three years, and that indirectly."

"That was your own fault," the girl said, with a touch of bitterness. "I wrote you two letters, and as I received no answer from either, I naturally concluded you did not care to hear from me."

Larkin's face was a study. A great burden was lifted from his heart, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from declaring his passion then and there. "Miss Helen," he said, speaking in a low voice, "there's never been a day that I didn't hope to get a letter from you, but when I received no answer to the one I wrote you, I thought you didn't care, and so I wrote no more."

It was Helen's turn to be surprised. "You wrote me a letter!" she exclaimed, "How strange that I never received it."

They both laughed then, the happy laugh of youth when a misunderstanding is swept away.

"I have kept track of you through Mr. Kent's letters," Larkin said; "but there's one thing he wrote me, and the same thing has been referred to here tonight. I mean the part you took in the capture of Lawson. Will you tell me about it?"

"Oh, I took no part in his capture," she hastened to say, "but possibly his capture was hastened by his—his—interview with me." She turned an earnest face toward him. "You will pardon me when I say that I do not like to dwell upon the events of that morning. Uncle knows all about it, and will doubtless take pleasure in giving you the details of the adventure."

Evidently, she wished to change the subject, for she turned again to the instrument and struck a soft chord. "Before you went away," she said slowly, "you were thinking of—of improving your education. You have been doing something in that way, haven't you?"

"I have read a good many useful books," he answered, "and I have studied to improve my speech; these efforts have helped me, but I have never left off wishing for the education I still hope to acquire."

"You are four and twenty," she said with an arch glance, her face at once turning to the piano, her fingers touching the keys. "Will you go to school?"

Larkin lost his head and gave free rein to his heart. "I will go to school if I can get the teacher I want," he cried. "Oh, Helen, you must understand me. I know I'm not fit for you, and I shouldn't annoy you in this way; but it must come out! I have loved you so long, dear—ever since the first day I saw you. Be my lifelong teacher, dearest Helen, be my wife; and I'll be the best pupil teacher ever had."

In his ardent pleading he had risen, and stood hopping, trembling, beside her. For a moment she re-

mained in shy embarrassment, a tide of crimson creeping over cheek and neck; then rising, she faced him, her eyes full of happy, unshed tears. "I will accept the position, Stephen," she said with a happy laugh. I believe I have loved you as long as you have loved me."

Guy Kent, standing unobserved in the doorway, was a witness to what had happened, and came forward with a smile of satisfaction on his face. "Yeh needn't ask me fur her, Stephen," he said, "Helen hes made her own choice, and I'm selfish enough t' think she's sensible 'cause she's choosed the man I hoped she would. I s'pose I'd ought t' say somethin' grand by way of givin' my blessin', but I guess yeh know yeh've got that 'thout it's bein' sed. Ev'rybody knows I'm a selfish old maverick, and right here I want it understood that I'm mean enough t' rejoice at this turn o' things 'cause I kin turn it to my own benefit. Things hes all come my way, after all my worryin' fur fear they wouldn't. I even wrote Stephen 'bout that 'er dude of a lootenant that was hangin' 'round——"

"Uncle!" cried Helen, "how could you?"

"Knowin' th' lay of th' land and thinkin' that mebbe it might stir Stephen up a little," resumed the old man, not noticing the interruption. "I knowed Missy didn't care a rap fur th' feller, fur though old bachelders hain't s'posed t' know ennything 'bout wimmin', they can't help hevin' sense enough t' know which way th' wind's blowin'. Now, Missy, it's time fur yeh t' go. Yeh'll hev a hull lifetime t' talk t' Stephen, and I want him a little while by myself. Pay yer respects t' yer old uncle, and t' Steve, too, if it suits yeh, an' run along."

She slipped an arm round her uncle's neck and kissed him good night, whispering as she did so: "You have made me very happy, uncle," then tender-

ing her lover the same salute with the explanation: "Uncle said I might," she left the room.

Guy Kent settled himself into an easy chair and leisurely filled his great pipe. Soon clouds of smoke began floating upward, and the ranchman found speech. "I've be'n thinkin', Stephen," he said, "of how old a feller hes got to be 'fore he gits through hopin' and plannin' fur the things of this world. A good menny men don't think of buildin' a house till in th' course o' nature they're 'bout through needin' th' use o' one. Most of us don't plant an orchard till we can't expect t' eat th' fruit it bears, and th' wig of a jedge, er th' togs of a senator ginerly fall on a gray head and on shoulders bent by age. Ef I was t' cross th' divide t'night I'd hev no partic'lar kicks a'comin', fur as things go, ev'rybody would 'low I'd hed my share. To'night's happenin's hes sot me goin' with all sorts of plans fur th' future, always dependin' on you and Helen t' help me carry 'em out. I've got th' 'necessary' capital, and you two hes got th' youth and ambition. Between th' two they won't be no clash, fur I know yeh both well enough t' depend on yeh, I——"

"But," he said, interrupting himself, "yeh've hed a long journey an' I musn't keep yeh up enny longer, —to-morrer 'll do fur talkin', I guess."

"Yes," said Steve, there's no doubt now of my remaining in Montana, and I'll be glad enough to fall in and carry our your plans. But, I want to hear tonight the story of Lawson's capture, and particularly Helen's part in it. You wrote me that if she hadn't 'winged him' he probably wouldn't have been taken so soon, and that when I came you'd tell me the whole story. Can't you give it to me now?"

"No time like th' present," Kent acquiesced, "you asked Missy t' tell y', didn't yeh? I don't blame her fur not doin' it; it wus a purty delicate place t' put

a young girl in, even ef she could shoot and *did* shoot when th' proper time come. As I said a-fore, I don't blame her fur not wantin' t' talk about it, no more'n I blame yeh fur wantin' t' know th' circumstances.

"Yeh know th' county offered a reward of five hundred dollars fur th' capture an' conviction of Lawson. His description wus posted with the offer of reward in all parts of th' country, and officers wus huntin' him ev'rywheres; but hide ner hair of him they couldn't find. I've noticed that th' best place t' find a feller in a crowd is to stan' still and let him come t' yeh, and it's a fact that criminals is somethin' like cats; they don't seem t' git attached t' persons so much as they do t' places. Let a man cut up enny kind of a rusty an' th' chances air a hundred t' one that he'll come back there sooner er later, I dunno why, t' look th' ground over. I guess yeh'll recollect, that one time when Lawson wus to our house, 'bout th' first of his comin' 'round here, he was mightily interested in findin' out 'bout what hour Missy took her hossback rides, and whether er not she wus alone when she took 'em. Seems that feller hed some deviltry in his pesky head even then; though what he wus t' gain by his contraptions I can't see, fur Missy told him p'int blank when he asked her, one time, that it wan't no go, th' time bein' too, when we, all but yerself wus thinkin' he wus a purty likely chap. They wusn't a soul of us ever thought of such a thing as Lawson's comin' nosin' 'round here with that reward hangin' over his head, much less Missy, which she would 'ave took them 'fore-breakfast rides jes th' same, I reckon, fur she ain't 'fraid o' nothin', much less sech a miser'ble kyote as he is.

"Yeh remember that little canyon, clos't by th' trail frum here t' Lorimer's place, where th' clear

little spring gushes from th' rocks, and where's green grass and so many posies? That's a place my girl always did like, and when she's be'n over t' Lorimer's place, she most giner'ly gits down there, mebbe t' hev a drink o' water, mebbe to pick a bokay.

"Airly one nice mornin' in October she'd be'n over t' Lorimer's as usual, and in comin' back turned up amongst th' hills and bushes to th' little canyon, fur they wus some fall flowers in there that she wanted. 'Taint more'n a hundred yards from it's mouth up to th' spring, y' know, so she left her hoss out there while she strolled along, pickin' flowers, and I've no doubt hummin' a little tune, like she alwus does. She hed good luck findin' flowers fur when she got t' th' spring her arms wus full, and she sot down on the grass with her back ag'in th' steep side of th' rock to arrange 'em in a bokay. She hedn't be'n there very long when she hears a step and lookin' up who does she see but Lawson, standin' 'bout six feet frum her, grinnin' like a skunk eatin' bugs.

"'Good mornin', Miss Fiske,' says he, raisin' his hat a foot above his head, and makin' a bow like a French dancin' master. 'I'm pleased t' meet yeh,' he says.

"Missy says she wusn't scar't, but I reckon she wus a little bit. Ennyhow, she gits up on her feet and sez she: 'I ain't pleased t' meet you, sir;' and with that she makes a move t' git past him, and he plants himself right in her way.

"'O, don't go yit,' says Lawson, grinnin'. 'I ain't seen yuh in a long time, and th' sight of yeh does me good. Come, darlin', go with me,' he sez. With that he makes a jump fur her and ketches her in his arms, 'cause th' rocks wus behind her and she couldn't git away. I don't b'lieve she hollered onc't; that ain't her style. But knowin' her as well's I do, I

calkilate 'twould be as easy t' run away with a wild-cat as with her."

Kent paused and glanced at the young man opposite. Larkin's face was white and drawn, his fists clenched, his eyes glowing like fire.

"I kin imagine how yeh feel, Stephen," he said kindly, "an' I won't spin th' story out more'n I c'n help. Somehow, in th' tussle, a gun that wus in th' pocket of Lawson's sack coat, hit ag'in Miss's arm, an' she wus onto her job at once. Quick'er a wink her hand dropped into that pocket, and she hed th' self-cocker. Lawson let go o' her then mighty quick, fur he realized that th' thing might go off. So they stood there fur a minnit, she with her back ag'in th' rocks, holdin' th' gun an' eyin' him. He, cussin' and swearin' that he loved her, and that he'd make her go with him.

"Purty soon Missy says: 'Stand aside and let me pass.'

"'I won't,' sed Lawson.

"'Then yeh'll take up with what yeh git,' she says. 'I'm going, now, and if yeh molest me I'll shoot yeh.'

"'Yeh don't dare!' he yells.

"'Yeh'll find out,' she sed, cool 's a cucumber, an' with that she made a move an' that blamed fool made another jump fur her. 'Bang' went th' gun, and she walked past leavin' Mr. Lawson on th' ground with a broken leg. That's how she winged him, Stephen."

Larkin drew a long breath of relief. "What did she do then?" he asked.

"She walked down th' canyon towards where her hoss wus, Lawson's cusses follerin' her ev'ry step. She found the outlaw's hoss there, tied to a saplin', and turned him loose; hit him a cut with her ridin' whip, and hed th' satisfaction of seein' him gallop off over th' ridge. Then she ketched her own hoss, an'

ridin' back t' Lorimer's, told 'em where they'd find th' game."

"Did Lorimer take him?" Steve asked.

"Yes, Lawson crawled down th' mouth o' th' canyon, lookin' fur his hoss, but he couldn't git no farther, and they gobbled him."

For some minutes the two men sat in silence, each busy with his thoughts, then Kent said "Good-night" and left the room. Stephen wandered out into the open air. Away to the east, daylight was breaking over the mountains, and a great white star hung like a sparkling pendent in the midst of the growing light. The young man, enrapt, gazed at the beauty of the heavens, while a flood of lofty thoughts surged through his brain. "How like my life," he said aloud. "Daylight is breaking for me, and in the midst of all is my star, my peerless Helen."

CHAPTER XXII.

The days that followed were full of busy happiness. At Kent's request Larkin reassumed his old position, galloping daily hither and thither over the great range, spending the quiet, blissful evenings with Helen.

During the last days of January came Lawson's trial. Witnesses for the prosecution had been summoned from far and near, even from over the mountains where he had many times disposed of his booty. During the trial it transpired that the man's real name was Harvey Richards. He was the wayward, profligate son of a well-to-do New York family. To his credit, he expressed a desire that his relatives be kept in ignorance of his career. The prisoner was sullen and vindictive. That he was not entirely friendless was evident, for during the few days preceding his arraignment several low-browed, evil-looking men called at the jail to see him, and from no apparent effort on his part, able counsel had been employed to conduct his defense. Tried only on the charge of cattle stealing, and readily convicted by the overwhelming evidence, he received a sentence of twenty years at hard labor, with the assurance from the presiding judge that good behavior during his confinement would have much to do toward softening the rigors of the law on the other counts in the indictment that would follow upon his having served his time.

Before he left town, a deputy called upon Larkin.

"The prisoner, Richards, wants to see you," he said. "Will you come to his cell?"

Steve attended, and as might be expected, his appearance at the cell door was the signal for such a volley of blasphemous abuse as is seldom heard.

"I will have your life," the miscreant howled in conclusion. "You are the cause of my being here, you and one other, and if ever I get out I only want to live long enough to kill you both, and I'll do it, too."

Larkin turned from the place in silent disgust. The threat against his own life he regarded lightly but who was that "other?" Possibly Campbell, whose presence at the trial, had not been deemed necessary, or, he caught his breath convulsively as the thought flashed through his mind, it meant—Helen. For days the shadow of the outlaw's threat bore heavily upon him, but prison walls are strong, and as twenty years is a long time to look forward to, he gradually dismissed it from his mind.

In the early springtime, when the snow had disappeared from the ranges and the great alfalfa field was taking on its summer coat of dark green, there was an old-fashioned wedding at Cotton Run. All the neighbors and friends for miles around were there; for once the herds of the various cattlemen were left to care for themselves, that every man might attend the wedding.

Away from Colorado, by a most circuitous route, came Dave Campbell to act as best man, and what a singular coincidence it was, that on the same train that bore him to Franklin City, arrived the bridesmaid, Miss Mary Manning.

A goodly number of friends, representing the best elements of the bright young western town, came up from Franklin City to do honor to old Guy Kent and his niece, incidentally, too, to enjoy a two-day holi-

those rare mortals who endure that others may enjoy. "It is nothing, I am really very well," she would say to her son's anxious inquiries, or "I'll be better now that spring has come." But once, she laid her head on his shoulder, sobbing out the whole truth in a single sentence. "I am heartsick and homesick, dear Stephen, and will die if I cannot go home."

There was a conference held in Guy Kent's room that evening, at which Steve and Helen and the ranchman were present. The young man spoke of his duty to his mother. "Much as I owe to you, and much as I love my life and duties here," he said in conclusion, "I owe a first duty to mother. She has no one but me to care for her, and I would prove false to my trust if I did not use every means in my power to preserve her in health. I must make her a home in the east for the remainder of her days."

Guy Kent sat without a word until Steve had finished; when he looked up his face was by no means as sorrowful as his attitude had indicated. "Stephen," he said, briskly, "I think yeh must have guessed fur some time that they wus somethin' in th' wind. I'd meant t' tell yeh 'fore this, but seein's I haint, I reckon now's the' time t' do it. Ev'ry-thing's all th' time changin' an' if a feller's goin' t' be in at th' roundup, he's got t' stay in th' saddle. Foreseein' that th' days of free rangin' is about numbered, a lot of cattlemen hevin' th' ready-come-down is talkin' of not only buyin' the improved ranches hereabout, but a good menny thousands of acres of wild range. They're goin' t' fence it all with barbed-wire, and go inter stock raisin' hullsale. Most of th' ranchmen round here, m'self among 'em, 's toads in this mighty big puddle, and they ain't no kind of doubt but what yeh'll be offered th' finest sort of a layout t' stay with th' comp'ny. Th' deal's a sure

go, tho' it may take a year 'r two t' complete arrangements. Things will be vastly dif'rent then. They'll be chances t' make money, but most of th' men 'll be jes' employees. I've lived in the East and I've lived in th' West. Life is big and free out here, but when it comes t' home-makin' and enjoyin' th' comforts we've got a right to, we ain't nowhere with the East. Missy's got a fine education, and yeh'll agree with me that t' keep her out here on a ranch always, would be takin' away most o' what of right belongs to her. I respect yeh fur yer sentiments about yer mother, and I think th' best thing yeh c'n do it t' go East, pick out th' finest place y' know of, buy it and settle down. What do you think of it, Missy?"

Helen turned a radiant face to her uncle. "I would like it above all things, Uncle," she said. "Stephen's home will be my home, wherever it is; but what about you?"

Kent beamed on his niece. "Jes' like yeh, Missy," he chuckled, "always figgerin' fur yer old uncle. Never mind me, gal, When that new home in the East is rigged up t' yer taste, keep one o' th' best rooms in it on tap fur yer uncle, 'cause he cal'lates t' use it off and on, oftener on than off. I'll be a d'rector in th' new comp'ny, an' will do consider'ble gad-din', but I'll round up t' your house middlin' reg'lar."

Helen ran over and gave her uncle a kiss. "What a dear old man you are!" she cried, clinging about his neck.

"There, there!" the ranchman laughed, shamefacedly, as he returned the salute. "Don't smother me, I ain't done nothin'. What air yeh thinkin' 'bout, Stephen?"

"I was thinking," the young man said slowly, "first, of what a pleasant future you have laid out for us all, second, of how I am to get that fine place in the East. A home, such as I would like to have for

you all would cost much more money than I can command. We will have to get along with such as we can afford, for the present, at least."

"That will be no hardship," cried Helen, her eyes sparkling.

Kent, sitting by his desk, pushed back the roller-top, and fitting a key to a drawer, opened it to bring out a small bundle of papers. "If you folks'll excuse me fur a minnit," he said in an apologetic tone, "I'd like t' explain th' only underhand piece of biz'ness I ever went into to my recollection. Five years ago las' fall, I bought fifty shares of gold minin' stock, par one hundred. It was th' Crooked Crick Minin' Comp'ny's stock, th' same where Dave Campbell's father is president, and I bought it on his recommendation. They's be'n no end to th' dust taken out o' there, and th' stock hes paid forty percent annual dividends most ever sence I've hed it. That means that it's earnt a clean ten thousand dollars. I sold out th' hull fifty shares t'other day at two hundred and fifty, er at a profit of seven thousand, five hundred dollars. Now, allowin' int'rest at eight percent on th' investment, which makes two thousand dollars, and countin' five hundred dollars I've paid out in taxes, th' clean, net profit is jes fifteen thousand dollars. Middlin' good investment, I guess, don't yeh think so?" and he turned appealingly to where the young couple sat wondering at this sudden display of confidence.

"Excellent!" cried Steve.

"But, Uncle," protested Helen, "you said it was an underhand piece of business. How could such a straight transaction be at all underhanded?"

Guy Kent actually blushed. He twiddled the roll of papers in his hand, stirred nervously in his seat, then with eyes bent on the floor blurted out: "Why, I'll tell yeh, Missy. Ev'rybody knows I'm a selfish

old maverick, all th' time lookin' fur places where I c'n invest my money so 's t' hev it draw good int'rest. I took th' liberty t' invest that five thousand dollars in th' name of another man, and all th' net profits b'longs t' him."

The pair before him sat in silent bewilderment when the ranchman went off suddenly on another tack. "Yeh've got a nice big bunch o' cattle, Stephen," he said, "an' them I'll buy and pay y' what they're wuth. Yeh've got quite a few hundred dollars on hand and comin' to yeh, and Missy's got a little, too. Seems t' me with what yeh've got and with th' fifteen thousand dollar profit on th' investment I made fur ye, yeh'd ought t' buy a purty fair place t' live in th' East."

Larkin was on his feet in an instant, his face showing his deep emotion as he gasped: "You don't mean to say that you invested the money for me?" And Helen exclaimed hysterically: "Really, uncle!"

"'Twan't fur nobuddy else, and they ain't no use of makin' enny partic'lar fuss about it. Yeh see I wanted that 'er eight percent. on my money, and—"

The speech was never concluded, for Helen's arms were round his neck, while she smothered him with kisses, and her husband was wringing both his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Squire" Bronson, Justice of the Peace, wealthy freesoil farmer, and by reason of all this the great man of his community, sat fuming on his shady piazza one warm morning in May. Notwithstanding the fact that in the possession of worldly goods he was far and away in advance of all other dwellers in the fertile region of Wyncross, or that nature and opportunity had long striven together to place him high in the estimation of his neighbors and—himself, he was in anything but an amiable frame of mind that morning when with the falling of his gate latch, he looked up to behold a stranger coming up the walk. The man, an athletic, fine-looking young fellow, who carelessly swung a small leather grip, strode straight up to the great man's chair, offering his hand as he said: "How do you do, Mr. Bronson?"

The Squire grunted audibly and surveyed his visitor from head to foot before putting forward a toil-hardened hand. "Purty well, sir, purty well fur an old feller that's got trouble of his own," he growled. "But you've got the advantage of me. I don't seem to know you."

The young man removed his hat and ran his fingers through his crisp hair, "Strange, you shouldn't recognize Stephen Larkin," he said, smiling.

"Now, bless my soul!" the squire exclaimed. "You ain't re'lly Steve, be you? Set down. When 'd y' come home? Be yeh goin' t' stay? Hope yer lookin' fur a job, fur I've got t' hev a man."

Steve sat down. "I arrived yesterday," he said, "and I've come to stay. I'm sorry, but I'm not looking for a job, at least not at present."

For some time the two conversed upon the ordinary topics of the day, then Larkin broached the real object of his visit. "I heard last night that you had offered your farm for sale," he said.

"Dunno but I'd sell," Bronson replied. "Can't do much work m'self enny more, an' a feller can't git no decent help. Who's thinkin' of buyin' a farm like this, Steve?"

"No matter; if you have the time to spare, I would like to take a look over it."

A two hours' inspection of the fertile, well-watered fields, the timbered land, the fences and the out-buildings brought the two men back to the piazza of the old colonial mansion. Larkin approached his purpose without delay. "How much cash will buy your farm, possession given at once?" he asked.

The squire eyed his visitor with keen caution.

"Who wants t' buy it?" he asked for the second time.

"I do," was the direct reply.

Bronson almost bounded from his chair. "You dunno what yer talkin' 'bout, boy," he cried with an incredulous laugh. "This farm can't be bought fur less'n fifteen thousand dollars. Where on earth 'd you git that money?"

"I think the farm is worth what you ask," Larkin said calmly. "Will you take that amount for it and give possession immediately?"

Bronson looked at his visitor with an incredulous smile on his face. "I will," he said presently, "when you convince me you ain't a' foolin' me."

"Well, I'll pay you one-third of your money to-day, as an evidence of good faith. Please write me a receipt, which will suffice until to-morrow, when we

can have the deed drawn at Fulda, and I'll hand you the balance then. He raised his satchel to his knees, and opening it, took five thousand dollars out of a bulky package of bank notes. "I brought ready money, for I thought you might prefer it to a check," he said to the astonished farmer.

"I hope you come by this money honestly, Mister Larkin," the old man faltered.

The danger signal flashed in Larkin's eyes. "You wouldn't have dared make such an insinuation had you been a younger man," he said, sternly.

The quiet country community was stirred to its depths when the news of the sale, and the name of the purchaser of the Bronson farm was spread abroad. It was a tremendous financial transaction to the simple folk, to whom a few hundreds constituted wealth, and as many thousands, affluence.

"Didn't make no more bones 'bout carryin' 'round all that money 'n I would a ten cent shinplaster," old Bannister declared at the next well attended meeting of the "stove committee" at the post office. "Squire Bronson sed he jes' took his little satchel up on his knees an' handed out th' spondulix 's ef he wus ust t' doin' it ev'ry day."

"It's said that Fortune knocks at least once at every man's door, and I guess Steve was at home when she called," said Ned Palmer.

"Some men don't wait fur fort'hin t' call," said Bill Poole, grudgingly, "they take her by th' neck an' force her to be kind. A feller can't jump up a hill; he's got to climb one step at a time, they ain't no royal road to fort'hin. I've be'n climbin' fur years an' ain't got there yit."

"Wa'al, Willyum," drawled Banister, "th' trouble with some is thet too much time is spent in keepin' ambishion below what th' constitooshun c'n stand."

Poole, whose impecuniosity was proverbial, had

nothing more to say on this occasion, but the community never fully recovered its surprise at the success of Steve Larkin, and never tired of trying to solve the mystery of it.

With the coming of summer, Steve's wife and mother arrived, as did his two saddle horses, one a fine, large dapple gray, the other a beautiful spotted Arabian, both under the charge of an old ranchman who answered to the name of "Bill Wilson."

Under the direction of the sprightly western woman, the spacious Bronson homestead was thoroughly renovated and refurnished, the process serving to keep the gossips of the countryside, both male and female, in an ecstatic agony for weeks; then things settled down to their natural quiet, leaving the Larkins on the crest of social life, and with the reputation of being possessed of almost unlimited means.

Larkin realized that knowledge was power only when accompanied by action. With all the strength of his sanguine nature, he plunged into the duties of his new life, calling to his aid a wealth of knowledge drawn from the best authorities, always seconded by his own common sense, experience, and habits of close observation. Despite the prophecies of certain agriculturists who exist in every rural community, and whose loudest boast is that they do not believe in "book farmin'," Bronson Farm soon became the pride of all the country about. The old barns were pulled down or remodeled; stables were erected after the latest and most approved plans, and the end of the second year witnessed the establishment there of a thoroughly modern stock and dairy farm. The home of the Larkins' was one of taste and refinement, and drew to its hospitable roof the best people of the surrounding country. Uncle Guy made frequent flying visits and was always full

of western ranch news, of the latest thing in cattle syndicates; breezy, eager, vigorous, and never quite ready to settle down for good.

Meanwhile, in a western prison, a silent, brooding convict worked—worked and thought of but two things: *Escape*, and after that, *Revenge*. "A good prisoner," the prison authorities called him, always pleasant and tractable, though reticent, doing his task with seeming cheerfulness and without complaint. Thus it came that many privileges were allowed the convict Richards, and when there came frequently certain tough-looking but quiet men to visit him, although invariably attended by an official, discipline was so far relaxed that notes were slipped through the grated door, and once a short bar of iron was passed in unobserved.

No wonder, then, that one evening in the fifth year of his confinement, the nude, senseless body of a warden was found in Richards' cell, the prisoner having escaped in the official's clothing. Outside, friends were waiting to conduct the convict to a place of concealment in the city where others of his ilk hailed his delivery with expressions of joy. In a corner of the basement room to which he was conducted, an underground burrow where thieves and murderers came and went and where the air was fetid with vile odors and the lights were dim, there could be seen the figure of a man lying with face prone upon a small table. Men in the last stages of intoxication were common sights in that place, and the presence of the huddled mass in the dark corner had no effect upon the convict or his friends. "Dead drunk," would seemingly have been a fitting term in which to describe the man at the table, yet Richards had scarcely opened his mouth to speak when a change came over the apparently senseless figure. Stealthily he turned his face toward the newcomer,

his black, beady eyes shining maliciously, his hands clenched tightly beneath the table. When the convict was taken from the room for better concealment elsewhere, the man at the table, now left alone, sat up, laughing with fiendish satisfaction, as he felt the edge of a long, keen-bladed knife. "Bombye! Bombye!" he muttered, hissing out the words, as though he already felt his victim writhing beneath his blow. "Bombye! Bombye!"

While the wires were busy describing the escaped prisoner to the chiefs-of-police in a hundred cities, and while officers were scouring the country in every direction, Richards lay within pistol shot of his late cell. After several days, on a stormy night of intense darkness, he and a companion stole away to the outskirts of the city, where horses were awaiting them; then they mounted and rode toward the south, wholly unaware of the wiry figure that had slunk out into the storm and, striking the trail, loped tirelessly along behind them, thinking but one thought, "Bombye!"

"Bombye!" he muttered when a few nights later he watched the convict creep into a boxcar on a railroad train bound eastward, and again he used the ominous words as he followed, a few car lengths farther in the rear. Thus, always in pursuit of his victim, he followed day and night, feeling the haft of his long knife, his mind concentrated upon the one thought of the revenge he would take; often within striking distance, yet postponing the bloody deed only to keep it in anticipation, "Bombye! Bombye!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was on a mild October evening during the third year of his life on the Bronson farm, that Larkin arrived at Fulda from a business trip to the western part of the state. He mounted Gray Don at the stable where the horse had been left two days previous, taking the road toward his home, joyous, light-hearted, his mind full of pleasant thoughts and at peace with all the world. Under these conditions the ride seemed short, and light was still streaming cheerfully from the windows of the Wyncross store and post office when he rode under a nearby shed, his intention being to inquire for his mail, and to chat for a few minutes with the friends and neighbors whom he knew would be congregated there. He had dismounted and was securing his horse, when the bright light from a bull's-eye lantern was flashed into his face, and he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver, back of which gleamed the pallid, demoniac face of the convict Richards.

"So I've found you, Larkin," sneered the convict in a low, hard voice. "I once warned you of my amiable intentions toward you, and have come a good many miles to redeem my promise. I've got the bulge on you, Mr. 'Stirrup Steve,' and before I proceed to pump you full of lead, I want to tell you that I have a double reason for making Mrs. Helen a widow, though her widowhood may not last long, for I may take it into my head to put a bullet through her heart, too."

"You are perfectly capable of it," said Steve, calmly.

"Right you are," rejoined Richards. "You both conspired to undo me, and what's good for one is good enough for the other. You've got all that I desired, all that I wanted, and, d—n you, you played your cards well. You were the means of sending me to prison, and I am only living to kill you."

During this harangue Larkin had spoken but once. He was horror-stricken at the prospect of sudden death, but his active mind was at work, and he watched his enemy with unflinching eyes. As the ruffian paused for breath, the store door closed with a bang, and Richards turned his eyes ever so slightly in the direction of the sound. It was his fatal mistake. Like lightning Larkin's hand shot out, knocking both lantern and pistol from the other's grasp, the report from the latter ringing out as it fell into a distant corner. On the instant Steve grappled with his enemy whose oath and curses filled the air, then the man's hold suddenly relaxed, a warm current flowed over Steve's hand, and the convict sank to the ground with the cry of "Murder!" on his lips.

In an instant the store door was thrown open, the company assembled there pouring out to the shed in time to hear Richards' dying accusation: "He killed me, curse him, Steve Larkin killed me." Then came the exciting scene described in an earlier chapter. Larkin's swift denunciation of the man who came to kill, but who by some strange chance had been killed instead. Selton's cold, accusing advice, the finding of the revolver, and the discovery of the long knife, haft deep in the dead man's back, and last, Helen, warned by Palmer and Barker, riding bareback into the tragic circle to ask but a single question, and then to declare her faith in the innocence of her husband.

Larkin gently disengaged his wife's arms from about his neck. "Let us go home, Helen," he said. "There will be some arrangements to make, for I must go to Fulda to-night."

"Why should you go to Fulda to-night?" asked Helen, anxiously. Larkin answered gravely. "Because I am accused of murder, dear wife, and must take the proper course to establish my innocence. The first step is to give myself up to the authorities."

Helen drew herself up proudly, no longer the weak, hysterical woman, but once more the heroic daughter of the range. "You are right, Stephen," she said. "You must go to-night; but you will not go alone?"

Larkin turned to Selton. "Mr. Selton," he said, "you are an officer of the law. Will you undertake to deliver my person to the sheriff to-night?"

Selton bowed gravely. "You know the way to Fulda, Mr. Larkin," he said.

"Such a proceeding as an accused murderer arresting himself would be irregular," Larkin said coldly, as he fixed his eyes on those of his neighbor. "You were first to accuse me, and you should be zealous enough on the side of law and order to claim the honor of delivering me where I can be kept safely."

All the nobility in Selton's fine character came to the surface as he stepped forward and grasped Larkin's hand. "You must allow, Stephen," he exclaimed, "that in the chain of circumstances things do look dark for you. But you are an innocent man if ever I saw one, no matter if things do look dark." He turned to the waiting crowd. "Friends and neighbors," he said, "who among you believe as I do, that Stephen Larkin did not kill that man?"

There was a murmur of assenting voices and then old Pete Bannister piped out: "Three cheers fur Mr. Larkin an' his wife!" They were given with a will,

and Larkin's voice was husky with emotion when he stammered his thanks, as he rode off in company with his wife to prepare for the momentous trip to the county seat.

An hour later, when a messenger had been despatched for the coroner, while the ghastly corpse still lay in the shed, and the country folk were yet conversing in awed voices in the store, a light carriage flashed by. In it was seated Larkin on his way to jail, and beside him sat his faithful wife.

A sharp ring at his bell brought the sheriff of M—— County from his cozy office chair to the door. By the light of his hall lamp he readily recognized his visitors as Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Larkin of Wyncross.

"Now, indeed, but I'm pleased," cried the curious executive, leading his visitors into his office and seating them. "Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Larkin?"

"Why, sheriff," Steve blurted out, "a man was stabbed to death up at Wyncross to-night, and I am accused of killing him. I had nothing to do with his taking off, but I thought the best thing I could do was to put myself in your charge."

"Tell me all you know about it, Mr. Larkin," said the officer when he had recovered from his astonishment.

Larkin told all he knew, the sheriff listening with strained attention to every word. "What do you think of it?" he asked when his narrative was concluded.

"It certainly does not look well for you," was the cautious reply; "but why did you come and give yourself up. You claim to be innocent, and have not been arrested. Why do you put yourself under arrest for a crime you did not commit?"

"It is true," was Larkin's grave reply, "that I was

not arrested, although I requested Mr. Selton to fetch me here. He declined, saying that I knew the way to Fulda. Under the circumstances apprehension was sure to follow, and guiltless as I am, I wished to avoid the humiliation of an arrest."

The sheriff spent a moment in thought. "You speak and act like an innocent man, Mr. Larkin," he said at last, "but it is still my painful duty to place you in confinement. There is a comfortable's woman's room here that is unoccupied. I will give you that for the present. Mrs. Larkin, if you wish to remain in town, please be the guest of my family."

"I certainly wish to remain near my husband," was Helen's reply, "and will gladly accept your invitation. Never mind, Stevie," raising herself on tiptoe to kiss her tall husband, "never mind, but think of what the Good Book says: 'Sorrow endureth but for a night; joy cometh in the morning.'"

In the morning Larkin sent for the most eminent counsel the county seat afforded, asking that witnesses be summoned and that his case be given a hearing at once. His wish was gratified and the expected happened; he was remanded to jail without bail to await the action of the grand jury. In a few days a coroner's jury found a verdict to the effect that the murdered man had met his death by means of a knife wound, at the hands of one Stephen Larkin.

A universal favorite, Larkin had the sympathy of all, though his most earnest partisans were forced to admit that the evidence against him was damning; even the knife which had been the instrument of death, having his name carved on its bone handle. During this trying time, Helen proved her worth. Under her management everything at the farm moved along in the usual way, though she never failed to make a daily visit to the jail to comfort and

sustain her husband. She had not written Guy Kent of their trouble. "It would only throw him into a great passion, and worry his dear old life out," she said to Steve. "Besides, the probabilities are that you will never come to a trial. Surely the grand jury will see things as they are. If you must stand trial, we will send for Uncle Guy and some of the old neighbors to help you out."

Despite Helen's high hopes, the January grand jury found an indictment against Stephen Larkin for murder in the first degree. His former good reputation and his word pleaded for him, that was all, and their plea was insufficient.

"You had better plead self-defence," advised the eminent counsel retained to defend him, after hearing his statement reiterated. "The man, Richards, had sworn to kill you, and his presence here, together with the fact that he evidently meant to make good his threat, should be sufficient to clear you."

"But I did not kill him," Steve contended, "why then put in a false plea?"

The lawyer puckered his brow, drumming absently on the table while he thought hard. Soon he turned an incredulous face to his client. "Mr. Larkin," he said, "your situation is becoming serious. It is time that you begin to place confidence in your counsel, if you expect him to do anything for you. A man was murdered under that shed, and if you did not kill him, then who did?"

"That's just what I'd like to know, Mr. Fish," exclaimed poor Larkin. "He was stabbed, but in the darkness I saw or heard no one."

Lawyer Fish spent another minute in thought. "Mr. Larkin," he said presently, "we lawyers pride ourselves on our astuteness, but everything that comes to our net is not fish. There are things that do not come within our province, although they may

be related to our line of work. The person who killed Richards must certainly have had a motive for his act. If we could find a man with a motive for the undoing of this escaped convict, we might find the real murderer. I would advise you to call to your aid a detective of known ability, and one you can trust. Your trial is six weeks off, and much may be accomplished in the interval. I do not know of a more astute observer and reasoner than your neighbor, Mr. Selton. Send for him, put him in possession of all you know of Richards and the men with whom he habitually associates. Start him off at once on a search for the man with 'A Motive.'"

Selton came in answer to Larkin's summons. He was a man in the prime of life, educated, of sober judgment and wide experience, an excellent listener and reasoner, and one who, having listened and reasoned, quickly came to sound conclusions and acted on them intelligently.

"I am here from a genuine desire to assist you, Stephen," Selton said. "Tell me the whole story of your western life and the men you met, and I may be able to help you."

At the end of Larkin's narrative, Selton asked: "You say that you missed your sheath knife soon after you had saved the life of the Mexican, Pedro, at the time of the blizzard?"

"Yes."

"According to your judgment, the girl you saw at Dawson's ranch was the sister of this Mexican, and from the conversation you heard at the spring, she in all probability had become jealous of Richards' attentions to someone else?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"Pedro was not to be found when the cattle thieves were taken and the body of a woman, not long dead, was unearthed there, eh?"

"Yes."

Selton sprang up and make a quick turn of the room. "Larkin," he cried, his eyes sparkling, "I think we are on the track of the right man. The Mexican owed you a debt of gratitude, which, in the killing of Richards he thought to repay, but above all he owed a debt to Richards, but scarcely one of gratitude. By following him and stabbing him when he was about to take your life, the Mexican was killing two birds with one stone. At all events, I will undertake to find this Mexican."

"You seem hopeful, Mr. Selton," the prisoner remarked, "but if my only hope lies in the chance of finding the man Pedro, then I am in a bad plight indeed. There are many Mexicans in the range country and Pedro has probably many reasons for not living too open a life. It will be very difficult to find him."

"Give me a description of the man."

Larkin gave as good a description as his memory would allow. "His surname, I remember, was 'Haurez,'" he said in conclusion.

"Any distinguishing marks that you remember?" asked the detective.

"The top of his right ear was missing and there was a long red scar on the back of his neck."

"Good marks," murmured Selton, "especially the docked ear. If the fellow is alive I have strong hopes of finding him. Of course it will be necessary to have other evidence connecting him with the crime; this I will endeavor to collect as I go."

"Keep up heart, Larkin," he said as he got up to go. "If you do not hear from me, remember that no news is generally good news."

The prisoner grasped his friend's hand. "When will you start?" he asked.

"To-night," was the ready reply, "and I will find the man if he is still on earth!"

The historic Mohawk Valley lay bathed in a white glory of moonlight when at midnight of the day that Selton had taken leave of Larkin at the jail, the night express thundered round a sharp curve, darted across a stretch of bottomland, and to the sound of hissing steam added the harsh, grating accompaniment of grinding brakes and escaping air as it came to a standstill at Fulda station.

One or two travelers alighted and strode shivering into the cold night, and from the waiting-room came a single passenger, a tall, brown-bearded man, who swung himself lightly to the platform and sought a seat in the smoker. The car was but sparsely occupied, and the newcomer having selected a seat on the river side, drew from his pocket a good cigar which he lighted at once, drawing in the fragrant smoke with indolent ease while he watched the white landscape glide by.

The conductor came down the aisle and touched the brown-bearded man on the shoulder. "Ticket," he said.

Selton, for the lone passenger was he, took a roll of bills from his pocket. "I will pay as far as Syracuse," he said; then, as he caught the eye of the conductor, he carried his hand through the mystic sign of an ancient secret order.

The conductor answered in kind, and as he offered his hand, said: "You are traveling west, to-night."

"One must sometimes travel west that he may return," was the pleasant answer. "Will you join me in a cigar?"

The conductor hesitated. He loved good tobacco, but he valued his position, too. "It is against the rules for us to smoke while on duty," he said, "but,"

sweeping the almost empty car with a swift glance, "I'll chance it just once."

He removed his cap for more perfect comfort, and dropping into the seat lighted the proffered cigar, the two soon drifting into a pleasant conversation on the topics of the day. Before many miles fell behind, a grimy, bearded face appeared at the glass door of the car, a pinched, hungry-looking face that vanished in an instant to come again for another cautious glance. Both men saw the fleeting features, and the passenger asked: "Who is that?"

"Hobo!" said the conductor, carelessly. "Sneaked onto the platform at Fulda, probably, and is getting pretty well frozen out by this time. My cap being off, he don't think any of the crew's in here and pretty soon you'll see him sneak in and slip into that end seat."

At the end of five minutes the door opened cautiously and a ragged, half-frozen tramp fulfilled the conductor's prediction.

"Will you stop the train and put him off?" questioned Selton.

"No, poor devil. Let him get thoroughly warmed up, and when we reach Utica I'll have to fire him, if he don't get off of his own accord. I'll manage not to see him before then."

"Are you much annoyed by persons stealing rides?"

"I should say we are. Scarcely a train passes over the road, either freight or passenger, that is not more or less infested with hobos. Of course we are supposed to put them off, and we generally do, when we find them."

"When you *find* them!" Selton exclaimed, "are they so hard to discover?"

"Yes, they are clever fellows, these ride-stealers, and long practice has taught them much about likely

places for concealment. Empty box-cars are the favorite, but they hide in every imaginable place. Platform cars, loaded with lumber, afford sheltering nooks; then there are the platforms of express-cars, stone and machinery cars, the bumpers, and I've even known some venturesome fellows to crawl in under the coaches and ride on the trucks."

Selton spent a few moments in silence, then proceeded to give the conductor his confidence, and in return his promise of assistance.

"I shall be glad to do all I can to help you," said the conductor, warmly. "My run ends at Syracuse. Stay there for the rest of the night, and to-morrow morning, if the men who manned the trains on the date named are in, I will introduce them all to you."

Six hours later the man from Wyncross was introduced to Conductor Kelly of the New York Central freight service. Yes, Kelly had run an east-bound train to Albany on October 7th last. "Hobos!" there were always plenty of those, but the conductor had seen no particular ones that trip. His two brakemen were called and questioned, but with the same result; they remembered no particular incident peculiar to the trip in question. All the men agreed that their train had passed Fulda before dark.

Selton and his friends turned again to the train register for October 7th to find that on that date, Conductor Brown had followed Conductor Kelly, two hours later. Brown's train had just come into the yard, but the conductor had not yet reported. He came within the next half-hour, answered questions readily, as did his brakemen, but, like the men who had preceded them, could call to mind nothing out of the ordinary as having taken place during the trip of October 7th.

Other trains had left Syracuse on the date named, but too late to be given a thought, and the searchers

were leaving the office when Conductor Brown called them back. "Just a moment," he said. "One of my brakemen tells me that he was not with me on October 7th. He was sick, and an extra man named Allen broke on the tail end."

"Is Allen in the yard?" was Selton's eager question.

"Come in last night and ain't due out till this afternoon," remarked a caller standing near. "Guess you'll find him to home, 168 —th street."

Brakeman Allen was sought and found at his home. He was a typical railroad man, young, alert, and of ready memory. When questioned he readily remembered braking extra for Conductor Brown early in October, and found the exact date by referring to his diary.

"Anything unusual happen during the trip?" he was asked.

The brakeman laughed slightly. "Nothing," he said, "unless it was the queer antics of a dago that was stealing a ride."

"Tell us of the dago," suggested Selton.

"I don't know that it will interest you much," Allen said. "He was just an ordinary dago hobo such as all railroad men see every day, and I found him doubled up in a sort of coop, formed by lumber of different lengths on a flat car, pretty well toward the tail end. I discovered him shortly after we left Syracuse."

"Did you put him off?"

"No, I was going to, but he begged so hard, and told such a pitiful story about being dead broke and trying to get to where his wife was dying in Albany, that I softened. Later, when I went over the lumber, he stopped me to ask if I could give him some grub. I kicked on that; if we staked every hobo that struck us, the caboose would go hungry most of

the time. But this dago wouldn't take no for an answer. Said he was starving; and finally offered me one of a pair of funny gold earrings he wore, if I'd find him a snack."

"What did you do?"

"I went back to the caboose, and while Brownie was busy with his bills, I swiped some bread and cold meat from the locker. I carried them over to the dago, and he gave me the earring. I've got it yet."

"Would you mind letting me look at it?" Selton asked.

"Not at all," and Allen produced the article in question from a tray on the mantel.

Selton examined the trinket closely. It was of fine gold, and certainly of a unique design, representing in miniature a Mexican saddle. A lariat was wound round the high pommel, and one tiny stirrup depended by a minute chain.

The examiner drew a magnifying glass from his pocket and inspected the reverse side of the ornament. An inscription appeared there and he read with ease: "J. Bierstein, Maker, Franklin City, Mont."

Selton's eyes sparkled with satisfaction. He penciled a few words in his notebook, saying as he returned the earring to its owner: "You saw the man take this thing from his ear. Did you notice anything peculiar about his ears?"

"Yes, the top of the ear he took the ring from was partly gone."

"Was his giving you this odd ornament in exchange for food one of the queer antics you spoke of?"

"No, that was merely a commercial transaction," said the brakeman. "What I called 'queer antics' was the fact that every time the train came to a

standstill, although I warned him not to let the 'con' see him, this fellow would scramble out, throw himself flat on his stomach under the bumpers, and, stretching out his neck over the rail, watch the right side of the train till he heard the go-ahead signal; then he'd dive back into his hole till we stopped again."

"Where did you see the last of your dago?"

"At Fulda. We had a hot box, and I started out to repack it. Just as I was passing an empty Fitchburg box-car, going home for repairs, another hobo dropped out so close to me that he startled me. I swung my lantern up in his face, and a more ghastly and tougher-looking one I've never seen. I said nothing, but the new man asked a question, 'Which way and how far is it to Wyncross?' he said."

"Right round the corner of the depot and four miles straight,' I answered, for I had been up in there hunting once, and I knew. The man gave a grunt and started off with short, funny steps. As he turned the corner I saw the dago crawl from under the bumpers where he had been lying, and sneak after this man, making no more noise than a cat. 'Pardners,' I said to myself, and I didn't see nor think anything more about 'em till now."

"Mr. Allen," said Selton, "your story of the two hobos has greatly interested me. You will probably be called upon to repeat it in court to save the reputation, the liberty, and possibly the life of a man unjustly charged with murder. If pictures of the two men you saw on October 7th were shown you, could you identify one or both of them?"

"I am quite certain that I could."

"Then I will depend upon you, when the time comes, and will now tell you of the case." He then rapidly sketched the situation to the wondering brakeman, and departed, exultantly conscious of two

facts. He had proved the correctness of his theory, and his belief in Larkin's innocence was firmly established.

Bidding farewell to the conductor, Selton was soon again a-rail, the end of another forty-eight hours finding him standing at the counter of "J. Bierstein, Jeweler, Franklin City, Montana." "Do you manufacture jewelry?" he asked after some preliminary conversation.

"I did a little in that line a few years ago," the man replied, "but after a short trial gave it up. In this small town it was not a paying venture."

"You once made earrings of a unique design. The pattern I have in mind was a saddle done in gold with a lariat wound round the pommel."

The jeweler gave his visitor a keen glance. "I remember the design you speak of," he said, "but as I made but two pairs after that pattern, one of which I still have in stock, I am naturally surprised at your question."

"I do not doubt that," said Selton, "and as I saw yesterday one of the set you disposed of, I am anxious to see those you have on hand for comparison."

Bierstein brought the duplicate set, and as his visitor nodded assent said: "There is a fashion among the Mexican cowboys of wearing earrings and I imagined that a saddle design would become popular, but it was a mistake for I sold but the one pair of them."

"Can you tell me to whom you sold that pair?" the visitor asked.

The jeweler consulted an old memorandum. "Yes," he replied, finally, "here is the entry. A Mexican, by the name of Pedro Haurez, was the buyer."

Asking a few more questions and finding that the jeweler knew nothing further about his man, he took

the tradesman into his confidence and secured his promise to testify at the trial if sent for. Selton then went to his hotel, well pleased with what he had thus far accomplished.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The office and principal place of business, of the Cotton Run Cattle Company was located in Franklin City, and on the management of this concern Selton called the morning after his arrival. It was early and those in charge had not yet arrived, tho' early as it was, the outer office was occupied by a half-dozen men, evidently waiting for business to begin. Bronzed, weatherbeaten fellows they were, varying in age from thirty to forty-five, carelessly, though comfortably dressed, yet with a certain similarity that stamped them as men of a class, and that class, "cattle men."

"Howdy!" they exclaimed nearly in unison as Selton entered the room, and "Howdy, gentlemen!" returned he, dropping readily into the vernacular of the range, "I hope I see you all comfortable."

"You bet!" chorused the company and one among them pushed an easy chair toward the stove. "Hev a seat, stranger," he said, "yeh must be chilly."

Well dressed strangers were common in Franklin, and the coming of one of them caused but a trifling interruption in the flow of conversation among the cowboys collected in the outer office.

"As I was remarkin'," said an athletic young fellow, "they's diff'rent ways of tamin' hosses. They're a good deal like men; some y' c'n coax, some y' c'n drive and some needs special treatment which ev'ry durn fool don't know enough t' give 'em. I never got left so bad in my life as I did on a tall, lanky

young tenderfoot that Uncle Guy Kent brung with him frum t' east some nine er ten years ago. Th' railroad wa'nt built yet, and th' two landed one mornin' off th' Queen, and come to th' Major's t' breakfast. Uncle Guy hed hired this gandershanked young feller, which he was mighty anxious t' buy a hoss t' ride t' Cotton Run. Major hed Mart and me round up some Americans he'd got off Rogers. Major thought they'd be'n rode, but they wan't a one that hed ever be'n saddled. When we got 'em in t' c'ral this young feller picked out a likely gray geldin' which he insisted on payin' fur 'fore he rode him. Said if he broke his neck tamin' him, he wouldn't be killin' some one else's hoss. We all went out to th' c'ral, Major and Uncle Guy out of curiosity, mebbe, but Mart and I was there t' see th' fun. Well, we wan't disappointed enny on heaven' our fun, but, it wasn't quite th' kind we'd 'lowed t' see. This 'ere feller hed all th' hosses but three, which th' gray he'd bought was one, turned out th' c'ral; then he went in with a bridle and ketched his hoss."

"How'd he ketch 'im, Aleck?" demanded a listener.

"Sung to him, by George!" cried Aleck, bringing his fist down with a thump on a near-by desk. "Sung mighty good, too. Why, he'd a 'sung the shoes right off'n that hoss 'f he'd hed enny on. Yessir, sung to him till th' first thing th' gray knowed they was a bridle on him and a man on his back. Rode him out on th' prairie and brought him back in thirty minutes, tame's a kitten. Best man I ever see with a hoss."

"Aleck," drawled one of the company, with an air of incredulity, "what was th' name of that 'ar musical cuss?"

"His name," answered Aleck, slowly lighting a

cigar, and evidently enjoying in anticipation what he was about to disclose, "was Steve Larkin."

"Stirrup Steve!" went up a chorus of voices, and when there came a lull, the incredulous one complained: "Why didn't yeh say in th' first place that Steve was the man yeh was drivin' at, we'd a' bl'eved yeh then."

"Slick duck with a hoss," remarked Aleck, enjoying the situation.

"Slick duck with a hoss!" cried the other. "Well, I reckon he was—slickest man that ever stood in Franklin county. And not only that, tell me what he wasn't slick in? Ev'rything he touched come right side up. Who but a slick one could ever done up th' rustlers as he done 'em? Where's they another c'd 'ave walked away with Guy Kent's gal as he did? Slick! Well, I guess not."

"I reckon Steve deserved all he got," remarked Aleck, between puffs.

"You bet!" went up the chorus again, and the stranger sitting quietly by the stove was treated to a half-hour's conversation, during which the astonishing adventures of Larkin at home and abroad, a-foot and a-field, his strength, his skill, his honesty and his noble nature were discussed perhaps with some exaggeration, but at least with honesty of purpose by those who knew him as he was.

There were plenty of references to Richards, the breaking up of his band of rustlers, and his subsequent capture, trial and imprisonment, but as nothing was said of his escape, Selton rightly concluded that the men before him were ignorant of the fact.

When came the opportunity, Selton observed: "Gentlemen, you will excuse me for interrupting, but as I am a neighbor, and friend of the man you are talking about, I have been greatly interested in

listening to your talk of him. Do you know where he is now?"

Six pairs of keen eyes were fixed on the speaker, the voice of Aleck first breaking silence. "That's a funny question fur you t' ask, Mister," he said. "If you're his neighbor, which y' say y' are, you hadn't ought t' ask us where he is."

"I know where he is," was the cool response, "but I doubt if any of you do. What would you say if I were to tell you that he is in jail awaiting trial for the murder of Richards, the escaped convict?"

Every man was struck dumb with surprise, and Aleck, first to recover, leaped to his feet with a wild oath. "It's a lie!" he roared. "Steve never killed nobody. What kind o' guff yeh feedin' us?"

Something in Selton's fearless eye and imperturbable manner seemed to curb the angry cowboy for he added in a milder tone. "Mebbe they's some things happened we don't know ennything about, stranger, seein's how we be'n spendin' all fall and winter way back on th' mountain ranges, and only jes' got in. None of us hes seen a paper in four months and we ain't heard no talk, neither. We're all friends of Steve's and if he's in trouble, and you know all about it, why tell us, that's all. We know he didn't do it."

Selton rose. "Come with me to my hotel," he said. "I will prove to you that what I have told you is true, and I may need your help toward proving his innocence."

"You can't lead off too quick, stranger, we'll foller," said Aleck, and the procession was soon landed into Selton's room.

The host at once took from his satchel a photograph of himself.

"This is my introduction and my main credential," he said, handing the picture to Aleck. "You will please read what is written on the back. I have

don't know th' black-hided, rat-eyed, crop-eared, scar-necked thievin' rustlin' greaser yer after, but they ain't a one of us sot eyes on him sence he didn't git what was comin' to him at th' round-up to Richards'es ranch. G'loots like him don't die easy, and they's no doubt he's moseyin' round th' earth 's usual. Not one of us fellers hes poked his nose off th' range fur a year, and we need a vacation. S'posen we draw our boodle, which we come fur, and spend a month helpin' Mr. Selton round up the greaser. Who's with me?"

Pete MacDonald stepped to the front. "I was one of them," he said, "that helped carry Steve a hundred mile after this'r cuss, Richards, hed plugged him, and I ain't th' kind of hairpin that won't stay by him now. Y' c'n count me in, Aleck."

"And me!" chorused the other four.

A tap came at the door, which opened to admit a bell boy. "Chief perlice t' see Mr. Selton," he announced, standing aside to allow a big man in uniform to enter the room.

"You called at my office and left your card before I reached there," he said to Selton, "and as I am about to leave town, I called to ask if I can be of service to you."

"I have no doubt that you can be of service," was the direct reply, "and you come at a most opportune moment. We are holding a sort of impromptu convention here, the result of which must have been reported to you, had you not come. Please take a seat."

At the end of an hour's discussion the chief rose to go. "It is, then, all settled," he said. "You, sir, and these boys, who say they know the Mexican by sight, are to search for him singly, and in different localities where he is likely to be found. You are all to keep in touch with me, so that in the event of

the man's arrest I can call you in and save further search. In four weeks' time, or to be exact, on the 15th day of February, at noon, we are all to meet in this room, whether or not any of you has been successful. Am I entirely right?"

"You are entirely correct. Isn't he, boys?"

"C'rect, in ev'ry particular, Mr. Selton," answered Aleck, speaking for all.

"Just one word, Chief," said Selton as the officer was leaving the room. "Have you a picture of Black Pede? And if so, might I borrow it?"

"Yes, to both propositions," was the ready reply. "Our gallery is ornamented with a good 'mug' of Pede, taken in his prime, and I will lend you the picture."

By mid-afternoon of that day, six of the oldest and most reliable employees of the Cotton Run Ranch Cattle Company had taken their wages due, asked for a few weeks' vacation, and although the strange coincidence had awakened the liveliest curiosity, departed silently without answering a single question.

Before night had fallen, Selton again called at the company's office. A polite clerk answered his inquiries.

"Can you tell me if Mr. Guy Kent is at present at his home ranch?" was the first question.

The clerk smiled. "Cotton Run is scarcely his home ranch any more, although Mr. Kent spends a part of his time there," he answered. "Our company takes its name from his old place, and as it is centrally located, is our main out station. You will not find Mr. Kent there at present, however. He, with several of our heaviest stockholders, have been in Texas since September looking after the interest of the company in a great tract of range land recently purchased. News of the day is a long time getting into the far back country where the new tract

lies, and three days ago, when Mr. Kent and the others came home, he learned for the first time that the husband of his niece, a young man quite well known about here, was in jail in a York State town under indictment for murder. Mr. Kent was terribly agitated, and left for the east in a few hours."

Other information would have been forthcoming, but for his purpose he needed nothing more. A cold, blustering night was falling when he reached the telegraph office, where he penned a telegram full of hope and cheer to the prisoner waiting in his cell at Fulda. The telegram, however, never was sent. The wire being busy, the paper was laid aside for a moment, later to be sucked out and sent scudding down the street at thirty miles an hour, when for a moment door and window were both open. "What people don't know never hurts 'em," soliloquized the operator, when he realized what had happened. He knew the value of silence, and he governed himself accordingly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

The man from Fulda boarded an early, west-bound train on the second morning of his stay in Franklin City. "Chickens come home to roost," he had told his lieutenants on parting with them the day before. "I have no idea that Black Pede remained long in the East after he had done the job that took him there. As far as I can gather, his life has been spent in the range country, and there we must seek him. That he has been in this country within the past six months, we have abundant proof, but as he has added another to the probable list of his exploits, or rather crimes, and as his latest endeavor that we know of is more or less connected with men and events in this immediate vicinity, it is more than probable that he will give the Montana range a wide berth. Born over the border, Haurez crossed the Rio Grande when he was much younger than he is now, and was undoubtedly a more honest man. If there is nothing there against him, what more natural course could he take than at this crisis to return to the ranges of Texas, or, indeed, to old Mexico itself. I think it would be wise for at least two of you to go to the southwest. I wish to visit the prison where Richards was confined, after which I will be as active as any in the search among the ranges and in the low resorts in the town."

Miller and MacDonald, both of whom had lived on the ranges of Texas and New Mexico, had vol-

unteered for service in the southern country, and Selton, communing with his thoughts as the train sped onward, reviewed with extreme satisfaction the result of his mission since leaving home. He had already collected enough evidence to give the color of truth to Larkin's statement and to produce a reasonable doubt of his guilt in the minds of any jury, but he also knew that his client would not be content without complete exoneration, and this could be brought about only by the production of the real murderer. Although he had from the first realized this fact, the vastness of the country over which he had traveled and was traveling, brought home to him in a manifold sense the difficulties, nay, the almost folly of his position.

No wonder, then, that his tranquillity soon vanished and he got up from his seat and began nervously pacing back and forth through the aisle of the car. On his third round a big, bluff-looking man who occupied a seat near the middle of the car leaned toward him and asked: "Got a match, pardner?"

Selton produced the article desired, and was moving on, when the man made room in the seat, saying as he did so: "Sit down and have a smoke, won't you? It's tarnal lonesome 'thout anyone to talk to; besides, you won't git there any quicker by walkin'."

The face of the speaker was honest and open, and Selton accepted the invitation.

"Eastern man?" queried the stranger, when the tobacco began to burn.

"You may be sure of that; and you?"

"Me! O, there ain't any doubt about me. I'm a westerner and a rancher. Have been the first always, and the last for a dozen years. How's times down East?"

A conversation on general topics brought out the

fact that the ranchman's name was Hawley, that his cattle ranged over an extensive field in the western part of the territory, and that he was the employer of a number of "cow punchers," as he called them. He had been to Chicago to dispose of some cattle.

The entrance, at a station, of several cowboys, among whom were two Mexicans, turned the conversation to the subject of cowpunchers in general, and Selton asked, "Do Mexicans, as a rule, make good men on the range?"

"Among the best when it comes to ridin', ropin' and cuttin' out," was the ready reply; "but the average greaser ain't to be depended on. He's lazy, sullen and treacherous, and the white boys don't like him. I've had a good many of 'em in my employ, first and last, but of 'em all, there was never but one I could depend on. This here greaser, whose front name was Pede, was one of the blackest, sulkiest, most onary lookin' cusses I ever see, but he knowed his biz'ness and tended to it, too. I was sorry when I lost him."

"How long was he in your employ?" Selton asked quietly.

"O, about five years. Let's see—he moseyed along there five years ago last summer and went off 'thout sayin' a word last September."

"What made him a particularly good man?"

"O, he done his work and minded his own biz'ness. I reckon that's all he had to recommend him, fur an uglier tempered cuss, nor a homlier galoot than that 'er crop-eared greaser never straddled a broncho."

"I am interested in the man," Selton said, steadying his voice by an effort, "and would like to hear more about him. You referred to him as 'crop-eared'; were his ears really cropped?"

Hawley gave his companion a keen glance, but proceeded without hesitation. "One of 'em was," he answered; "that's the reason we called him 'Crop-eared Pede'."

"Do you remember his surname?"

"Didn't have any as I ever heard of. Always answered to 'Pede,' same as a dog answers to 'Shep' or 'Jack.' I s'pose he had another name, though."

"What were this man's habits; his way of living, I mean."

Hawley's keen eyes searched the questioner's face. "You seem to be mightily interested in this 'er greaser, stranger," he said with a touch of sarcasm in his tones. "S'pose you let me in on what yeh're drivin' at."

Selton looked toward his companion and began to speak in a low, confidential tone. The ranchman grew intensely interested, as was evidenced by sundry nods, gasps and short exclamations. When certain papers had been produced and examined, he grasped the detective's hand in token of confidence.

"You're all right, Mr. Selton," he exclaimed, "fire away with your questions. I'll answer, as far as I can."

"I was asking you as to this Mexican's habits."

"O, yes! Well, as I said before, this 'er Pede rode a mighty good American horse up to my ranch, summer of five years ago. He wanted a job, and as I wanted a boy at an out station 'way up in the hills, I hired him and sent him up there. I found him a good herder and fond of bein' left alone, which was two of the best things could happen him. He was that shy of strangers that if one come along while he was around, he made himself scarce at once."

"Did he ever ask for a vacation, ever leave the ranch?"

"Aye, that was Pede's one peculiarity. When the

rest of the boys took a little toot after round-up he always stayed on the range; but twice a year, first of July and first of January, he'd draw what was comin' to him, saddle up and take the trail for the south. He'd be gone a month ev'ry time; then he'd come back and go to work."

"Do you know where he went on these excursions?"

"I don't, but I've got a greaser punchin' for me that does. This feller had been up to Marcella on a toot and brought home a bottle of bug juice with him. A nip or two of that loosened Pede's tongue, and he told Juan that he had a wife or sweetheart down in some Colorado mining town, and that there was where he went twice a year."

"You say that Pede left you suddenly, last September. Was there any unusual circumstance connected with his going?"

"I reckon it was altogether unusual. One day about as wicked a-lookin' greaser that I ever see in the cow country, rode up and inquired for Pede. I directed him to the out station, and he took the trail at once. Pede come in next day, drawed his boodle and lit out for good."

"Probably came to apprise the Mexican of the plot to liberate Richards, and that the time for taking his revenge was nearly at hand," observed Selton. "Would you recognize the picture of your man, Pede?"

"I reckon so."

Selton produced the photo which he had procured at the station house on the day before. "Is that he?" he asked.

"That's crop-eared Pede," cried Hawley, "without any doubt, and a mighty good picture of him at that."

The train was running into Hawley's station, when Selton said in conclusion:

"I expect to make my headquarters at Marcella for the present. Will you find out from your Mexican the name of the town where Pede's wife, or sweetheart, lives, and write the same to me?"

"I will write as soon as I can get home and see the man."

The travelers parted with mutual expressions of respect, Selton to continue his journey to the city of Marcella, where the state prison was located. There he was well received by the prison authorities, who could, however, do but little to assist him. They could, and did, furnish him with two excellent photographs of the late convict, Richards, one taken on his arrival, the other when clipped and smooth shaven, he was prepared for prison life.

To follow in detail the adventures of the four searchers after Pedro Haurez would require the telling of a separate story. It would be a story of watchful, wakeful nights spent in the slums of tough mining towns, cautious inquiries of men who had good reason not to talk, curious glances into the faces of cringing individuals who slunk swiftly and silently along dark places as if shunning the light, broncho rides over difficult mountain passes, snow-buffed in the terrible winter weather, or over long stretches of wind-swept plain or prairies where some lonely ranch was said to harbor a Mexican answering in a vague way to the description of the man sought.

Selton, as had been his intention, established his headquarters at Marcella, and from there opened communication with the chief of police at Franklin City. Ten precious days went by, during which he had practically exhausted the search in the city and its vicinity. Men there were who had known the

Mexican in days gone by, but none had set eyes upon him for years. Exhausted and somewhat discouraged, he reached his hotel on the evening of the tenth day to find two telegrams awaiting him. The first was from Hawley, and was characteristic of the sender. It read:

"To Z. Selton, Marcella, Mont.:

"Greaser off on toot. Hence delay. Wife or sweetheart, Denver, Col. HAWLEY."

The other had been a day coming from a cattle town in the Texas Panhandle, through the police office at Franklin City, to Marcella. It ran:

"Inform Z. S. man has been here lately. Gone north on visit. A. MILLER."

The amateur detective laughed aloud. "Good man, Hawley, good boy, Aleck," he murmured. "January! and our man off for his semi-annual visit. At what time can I get a train for Denver, Mr. Clerk?"

"In thirty minutes," replied that functionary. "And," consulting a railway guide, "if you are fortunate in making connection and have no mishaps, you should get there in about forty hours; it's a round-about route, you know."

Stopping only long enough to wire the police at Franklin of his change of base, Selton hurried to the train. His lucky star seemed to be in the ascendent, for close connections were made all through and there were no mishaps as the trains flew east, southeast and south to a junction point on the Platte; thence toward the setting sun, bringing the traveler to his destination in less time than anticipated.

A day's slumming in the dark places of the Colorado metropolis without success did not improve the temper nor the spirits of Larkin's champion.

He had gone into the Mexican quarter with confidence that morning; the man he sought was almost within his grasp, yet though he had interviewed more than two score natives, male and female, of the land of the Rio Grande, none *could*, or at least none *did*, give him the slightest information of Pedro Haurez. As he entered the hotel, a man sprang up eagerly and came toward him with outstretched hand. It was Aleck Miller, and the honest cowboy's eyes shone with gratification and welcome as he grasped Selton's hand.

"I almost thought I'd find yeh here," he said in a low tone. "I've tracked th' greaser from th' Panhandle in here, an' we'll have him in less'n twenty-four hours."

"Let us go to my room," Selton suggested. "We can talk more freely there."

In the privacy of the room Aleck gave an account of how he thought he had located the Mexican on a Panhandle ranch. A visit to the ranch in question developed the fact that Huarez had been employed there during the months of November and December, but that he had started on a month's leave of absence on New Year's Day.

"Greaser down there said he reckoned there was a senereeter to th' other end of th' trail," commented Aleck. "I tracked him from th' ranch to a station called Texline," he continued, "where he bought a ticket fur Denver. So I hit th' same trail and moseyed along, and here I be, too."

Selton's intended observation was cut short by a rap at the door. The night clerk stood without, and behind him a slouching figure. "I beg your pardon for disturbing you," said the clerk, "but here is a Mexican who wants to see one of the guests, and I thought from the description it must be you. Will you see him?"

"I certainly will," replied Selton. "Show him in." A typical Mexican of the lowest order shuffled into the room and stood hat in hand before its occupants.

"Well, my man," asked Selton, "what can I do for you?"

"You lika fin' Pedro Haurez, señor. Mia señora say you do."

"Do you know where he is?" was the direct question.

"Mebbe! W'at you gif?"

"That depends on what you have to sell. Do you know where Pede is?"

"I say, mebbe!"

"Maybe's don't go a great way with us. If you know where Pedro is, and will take us to his hiding place, you will be well paid; but you must do your work first."

"Pede no gotta hide place. Wan time he gotta señorita heer. Señorita die 'bout monts ago. Pede, he all broke up, go on big drunk, me know."

"We don't care what he is doing, we only want to find him. If you can help us do that, you will be well paid. Can you do it?"

The Mexican's eyes brightened. "A' right," he said. "Wan time we hev big fight, me and heem. Pede he draw gun queek, shoota me here." And the Mexican showed an ugly scar on his temple. "Now me show heem. In morning you comea deepo, an' we go 'way some place. We fin' Pede, you come?"

"At what time do you want us there?"

"You mek nine o'clock, señor?"

"Yes, we will be there. Can we depend upon you?"

"Sure, señor. Me show you Pede, an' me getta square all wan time. You giffa me twenty dollar, you gitta Pede, hey?"

"Yes, show us the man and you'll get your money. Now, good night. We'll see you in the morning."

"A' right, me come," and the Mexican shuffled out, leaving them alone. Selton sprang to his feet to pace up and down the floor excitedly.

"To-morrow we win, Aleck!" he cried. "It is another case of the man with a motive. This fellow will guide us all right, I think, for he has two motives: First, earning the money; second, paying off an old grudge. To bed, Aleck, to bed! To-morrow we win!"

On the morrow, when the nine o'clock train, west-bound, left Denver it carried away two white men and a Mexican. An hour's ride brought them to a town where they left the train, the white men putting themselves under the direction of their dark-skinned companion, who immediately led them to a low groggery in the worst part of the city.

The guide exchanged a few words in Spanish with the proprietor, a fellow countryman, who indicated a strong negative by means of voice, shrugs and shakes of the head. The Mexican turned to his companions with a rather crestfallen air.

"Me tinka Pedro here," he said. "No got. You taka chair, señors. Wait! Me come backa haf hour."

Selton and Miller seated themselves to wait. Soon two rough-looking men entered the place and, sitting down at a near-by table, called loudly for drinks.

"Sim ruther hed th' drop on th' greaser," one of them said, as he filled his glass to the brim.

"And a durn good thing fur 'im that he hed, too," responded the other. "Th' greaser's no slouch with a gun. He's prob'bly got more men than Sim's ever drawed on, an' 'f he'd a' be'n sober, Sim'd never got th' drop on him."

"Wonder whar Pede's be'n keepin' himself lately," said the first speaker.

"Dunno, eggsac'ly. Pede wasn't th' man t' blab as t' where he camped; too menny wanted to know, mebbe. He come in frum th' south, this trip, though. I was down to Denver an' I seen him git off th' cars an' sneak way down street towards whar his girl ust t' live. I reckon he didn't know Chiqueta hed passed in her checks. He's be'n ugly drunk ever sence. Got himself into two 'r three scraps down t' th' city an' things got too hot fur 'im. Come along here day 'fore yis'day and tried t' be gay with Sim, that's all. Reckon his gay days is over now."

"Wonder how he is this mornin'?"

"Livin' yit, but goin' fast. He'll cross th' divide 'fore night, like's not."

Selton got up and went over to the table where the men were sitting. "Gentlemen," he said in his suavest tone, "we are strangers, and a little lonesome. We want to get acquainted with some of the people here. Suppose you come over to our table and have something with us."

The invitation was responded to with alacrity, with the result that the two strangers were soon put into possession of the circumstances surrounding a bar-room fight on the night before that had ended in the shooting of a Mexican cowboy, known as Black Pede.

"Where is this wounded Mexican?" Selton asked. "We are looking for one of the breed and name; perhaps this is the man."

The men laughed boisterously. "I reckon yeh ain't th' only men that's lookin' fur Pede," one of them said; "but yeh're too late t' git him, gen'elmen, he's about all in. He's up here in a j'int, which th' p'lice don't know nothin' 'bout th' scrap. Ef it'll do yeh enny good t' interview 'im, we'll show y' up."

To a squalid room in a miserable tenement they were guided, where on a wretched pallet the wounded desperado lay stricken unto death. They were at last in the presence of the man they were hunting, for Aleck recognized him at once. He turned his eyes languidly toward his visitors and asked in a weak voice: "Watta want?"

"Is your name Pedro Haurez?" asked Selton, advancing to the couch.

The Mexican answered painfully with another question. "Watta mek?" he said.

"It makes a good deal," Selton said gravely. "Did you ever know a man named Steve Larkin, or 'Stirrup Steve'?"

A gleam of pleasure came over the haggard face. "Si, señor," he whispered, "me Pedro Haurez a' right, an' me knowa Señor Steve; heem gooda boy, sava ma lif' wan time. You knowa heem?"

"I do, and he is in prison for the murder of Harvey Richards. Do you think he killed him?"

The dying ruffian laughed aloud. "Naw," he chuckled. "I killa heem mase'f, señor, an' I lika killa heem some more. Heem dead now, an' I soon pass in ma check. You gitta w'at-you-call-heem notaire, an' I mek swear."

A notary was sent for, and little by little the story came out. Once only they were interrupted, and then by the Mexican who had guided the searchers from Denver. Pedro no sooner saw this worthy than he became terribly excited, the two beginning at once to hurl Spanish oaths and imprecations at each other. Selton laid a hand on the intruder's arm.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Me wanta me twenty buck," was the reply.

Selton handed him a bill of that denomination, and, as he still lingered, Aleck shoved him through

the door and gravely kicked him down stairs. "You git!" advised the stalwart cowboy.

Nita, Pedro's sister, had waited several years for Richards to fulfill his promise to marry her, and had at last, under the long delay, grown very jealous of him. In a quarrel after his return from Cotton Run Ranch she tried to stab her lover, failing in which, she turned the knife upon herself, dying at his feet. Pedro, who was absent at the time, had sworn to kill Richards, but had not seen the convict again until the night of his escape from prison.

"Wan man, he fren' to me, come wan time where I cowpunch for Señor Hawley, an' he say: "Pooty queek soma day Reechar outa jail. You wanta know, now you come see youse'f. I go see heem same night. I follow 'long after heem good ways, sometime I walk, sometime I ride. I see heem all time an' t'ink I killa heem bombye. After long time I killa heem w'en he tink he killa Señor Steve."

"Do you know what knife you used to kill him with, Pedro?"

Pedro smiled again. "Yes, me usa knife I steal from Señor Steve wan time in big storm."

"You have one earring on, will you tell me what you did with the other one?"

"I gif heem to onea brakesaman, way down east w'en I go after Reechar. Brakesaman he gif me soma grub."

The man was silent for a moment, breathing painfully, then said: "You take dissa wan earring, Señor, gif to Señor Steve. Tell heem Pedro no wanta more."

Selton gently removed the trinket, and, the notary having reduced the man's statements to the form of an affidavit, had Pedro attach his sprawling signature to the document.

After this Selton secured the services of a physi-

cian and with him again visited the bedside of the dying Mexican.

"Nothing can be done for him," said the doctor, after a thorough examination. "Internal hemorrhage has set in and he cannot live many hours. Under the circumstances, I would advise your remaining in town for a short time, that you may be able to take with you a certificate of his death."

That night, with a competent nurse to attend him, and with a priest of his own nationality and faith to soothe his dying moments, the Mexican passed out of life.

At a well advanced hour the morning after Black Pede's demise, the occupants of a double-bedded room in a Denver hotel began to bestir themselves.

"Aleck," called Selton, "what time is it?"

Aleck extended a languid hand from beneath the coverlet, and, taking a watch from a stand at his bedside, announced:

"Ha'f pas' eight!"

"Whew! but we must be stirring. Do you remember what day of the month it is, Aleck? I have lost track."

The cowboy made a mental calculation. "It's th' 'leventh of Feb'y," he said, finally.

"Then we have four days to get to Franklin to meet the boys, and nine days to get our evidence to Fulda in time for the trial; there's plenty of time if we have any sort of good luck. Have we left anything undone here, Aleck?"

"That's accordin' to what y' hev done," announced Aleck.

"Well, I've paid the doctor and the nurse, got the certificate of death, given orders that Pedro's body have a decent burial, wired Steve that we'd be on hand with conclusive evidence, notified the Franklin City chief to call in the boys, and sent a telegram to

Brakeman Allen, of Syracuse, asking him to be on hand at Fulda on the 20th with the other earring. I think, now, that all there is left to do is to eat our breakfast, pay our bill and take the ten o'clock train for Franklin City."

Aleck threw his feet out of bed, stood up and reached for his garments. "You're a cracker-jack, Mr. Selton," he said. 'When you throws yer rope, you gets yer steer. Seein' you've be'n goin' hull hog or none on this job, don't you reckon it might be 's well t' hev that ' notary go East and 'tend th' trial, too?"

"Excellent suggestion, Aleck," cried Selton. "As you say, let us go 'whole hog or none.' I'll see Mr. Notary before we start."

In due time the notary was seen, and readily promised to attend the trial, after which the two highly satisfied men took their seats in a train bound for Franklin City.

Railroad travel was slow, however, and unsatisfactory. In Nebraska the train ran into a blizzard that had been raging for two days. Wires were down, tracks were blocked with snow, and it was not until nearly noon of the 15th that the weary travelers walked into the hotel room at Franklin City to find the chief and five anxious cowboys awaiting them.

An exciting hour was passed. Inquiries were made and comments volunteered in the rich and varied vernacular of the plains, and each man had an interesting story of his own adventures to offer. Presently Selton said:

"I am going now to see Mr. Bierstein, the jeweler. When I return, and have had dinner, I must bid you boys good-bye, for I shall have to take the two o'clock express, making my way eastward as fast as possible."

He proceeded at once to the jeweler's establish-

ment. The proprietor was in, and to him Selton told the story of his success. "I do not want a broken link in the chain of evidence, Mr. Bierstein," he said. "If you will go East and testify to making the earrings, and of selling them to the Mexican, I will see that you are well paid for your time and trouble."

Bierstein thought for a moment. "I must go to New York on business, soon," he said, "and I may as well go now as to put it off. At what time do you start?"

"At two o'clock this afternoon."

"I will meet you at the station."

"Thank you. One suggestion: Perhaps it would be well for you to bring along the duplicate pair of earrings."

"I will do so."

When Selton came from the dining-room, having had his dinner, a surprise awaited him. His three cowboy friends were there, but what a change in them in the short space of an hour! Each man was dressed in brand-new store clothes, even to the traditional "boiled shirt" and linen collar, and each stood guard over a huge leather grip.

Aleck Miller approached Selton with a rather sheepish air. "We've shed our ev'ryday woollen, and got into these'r store togs, fur we're goin', too," he said. "We're goin' to see 'Stirrup Steve' through."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

James Fish, eminent lawyer and counsel for the defendant in the case of "The People against Stephen Larkin," was sitting at breakfast on the morning that the much-talked of trial was to begin, when there came a ring at his bell. Mr. Fish answered the ring in person, to find a well-dressed and intelligent-looking young man standing outside his door.

The stranger did not waste time. "Are you Lawyer Fish?" he asked.

"I am known as he," was the reply, "but if you have business with me, please state it as quickly as possible, for my time is valuable, especially to-day."

"I have no doubt of that," the young man replied. "I merely called to find out if Mr. Selton has arrived yet."

The lawyer became interested. "Please come in," he said, leading the way to his sitting-room. "Why do you come to me to inquire after Mr. Selton?" he asked.

The visitor did not lack ease of manner, nor was he disposed to dally. "My name is Eugene Allen," he said. "I live in Syracuse, and am a brakeman on the Central road. About ten days ago I received a wire from Mr. Selton, asking me to come here to testify at to-day's trial. I have been in town but an hour, but have made some inquiries since I came, and learned that you were counsel for the defense.

Thinking you would know more about Mr. Selton's movements than anybody else, I came to you."

"You couldn't have done better, Mr. Allen," was the hearty response, and Mr. Fish, drawing his chair close to that occupied by his caller, spent the next quarter of an hour in close conversation with him. The eminent counsel for the defense, entirely forgetting his unfinished breakfast in his eagerness to get to his client's side.

"We will ask for no postponements, Larkin," he cried, eagerly. "We will proceed to trial to-day. If you're not a free man in less than forty-eight hours, then I'm the poorest Fish that ever swam in the legal sea." And the usually dignified counsellor pranced around the room waving a bit of yellow paper over his head.

Larkin caught the boisterous spirit and started to his feet. "What is it?" he cried.

"What is it!" the lawyer repeated. "What is it! Why, man, it's a telegram from Selton, that's what it is."

"To you?" asked Larkin.

"To neither of us. The wire was sent more than a week ago to a man named Allen, who lives in Syracuse. Selton unearthed him on his way out from here, found that he knew a good deal that we wanted to know, got him to agree to testify at this trial, and eleven days ago wired him as follows:

"Denver, Col., Feb. 9, 18—

"To Eugene Allen, 168 —th St., Syracuse, N. Y.:

"All O. K. Meet me in Fulda 20th as agreed. Bring earring. ZERAH SELTON."

"Allen didn't receive this message until yesterday. It must have been delayed somewhere. Even money that we hear from Selton or see him before dark to-day."

"Where is Allen now?"

"Right here with us, and prepared to testify." And Fish, dropping into a chair, told the brakeman's story.

As the prisoner listened his eyes grew bright and his cheeks flushed with hope. "My trial is first on the docket," he said. "Hurry up matters as much as you can to get it before the court. We will begin it and trust to Selton to finish it. Have you cautioned Allen not to talk?"

"Allen will not open his mouth until placed on the stand," was the lawyer's assurance.

"That is well," said the prisoner. "Let us proceed with the trial as soon as possible."

When in the early morning the doors of the courthouse were thrown open, the crowd of people that had been gathering since early daylight surged in and filled the courtroom to its utmost capacity. It was an orderly crowd, made up largely of Larkin's friends and acquaintances, drawn there out of interest in his welfare, and also of those who came because of that morbid curiosity that always surrounds a trial for the taking of human life. Some were awed by the mysterious atmosphere of the great room where justice was wont to be dispensed; others were cool and entirely at ease, but all crowded and pushed good naturedly for seats or vantage ground, while they discussed the case in loud whispers, or craned their necks toward the door, hoping to catch sight of the prisoner, whenever a belated lawyer, tale sman, witness or an officer entered.

On the stroke of ten the presiding judge came in, closely followed by Larkin's counsel, his wife, mother, Guy Kent and their western friends, all of whom were given seats reserved for them near the bar.

The prosecuting attorney spoke a few words to the judge, the crowd saw a sheriff's officer leave the

room, and was soon rewarded by the sight of Larkin's tall form on the threshold, his hands unshackled, the glow of perfect health and hope in his eyes and on his cheek.

Absolute silence prevailed as the prisoner moved to his place. Then the ordinary routine of court preliminaries was begun.

"Prisoner at the bar," said the judge, "do you plead guilty or not guilty of the crime charged against you as set forth in the indictment read?"

Larkin rose and faced the court. "Not guilty, your Honor," he said.

The Court addressed the counsel for the defense. "Are you ready to proceed with the trial?"

"We are," was the simple reply.

A jury was selected with despatch. Men were there from all parts of the large county of M—, and there was no one to object to any talesman who might exhibit the common traits of honesty and intelligence.

By mid-afternoon the trial was in full swing. The district attorney had made his opening speech, in which he drew a fervid picture of the hideousness of taking human life to satisfy a thirst for revenge. He deeply scored the man who could masquerade like a wolf in sheep's clothing among his friends and neighbors as an honest man, when at best he was but a western desperado of the worst type. More than once his scathing denunciation had bordered on personal abuse, and in each case an angry murmur swept through the crowded room, the meaning of which it was not difficult to interpret.

The reply of Larkin's counsel was short, and, to most of those present, unsatisfactory. It was merely a general denial of the charges set forth in the indictment, a few shafts of sharp sarcasm flung at the prosecuting attorney, ending with a simple declara-

tion couched in the plural form so much in vogue with men of the law:

"We are innocent of the crime laid to our charge, gentlemen of the jury, and in due time we shall prove the same to you."

The swearing of the witnesses who had been at Wyncross on the night of the tragedy was an uninteresting process. They told their stories with monotonous sameness, no new fact developing as one man after another took the stand.

To the surprise of every one, Mr. Fish, who was considered the best criminal lawyer in the valley, did but little cross-questioning. He seemed listless and preoccupied, giving more attention to the opening and closing of the courtroom door than he did to the witnesses on the stand. If the counsel was expecting something by way of relief from that source he was, however, disappointed, for the afternoon was spent before the evidence for the people was all in, and court was adjourned until next morning, without any new developments in the case.

The people pressed from the room in disappointed silence, to gather later in knots at street corners, hotels and private dwellings, discussing the events of the day. Larkin's friends were dismayed, and they concluded, by the demeanor and evident apathy of Fish, that even the lawyer had lost hope. Few, if any, knew of Selton's mission abroad and everyone wondered whereon Larkin based his hope of acquittal.

As Steve's lawyer passed from the courtroom, he met Guy Kent, whose grave face showed his anxiety.

"It seems to me, Mister Lawyer," said the old ranchman, "yeh've throwed yer rope too fur. I'm afeared yeh've be'n altogether too fast in lettin' this trial go on."

The lawyer said a few encouraging words to Kent, telling him only to be patient until the next day's developments, and then passed on toward his house, when a new idea flashed through his mind and he turned and hurried to the telegraph office.

All day he had watched the door of the courtroom, anticipating the arrival of Selton, or at least a messenger with a telegram to announce his coming. Now he turned toward the office with a faint hope that a message might be waiting there.

An operator whom he had never seen before answered his inquiry.

"No," he said, "nothing has come over the wire for Stephen Larkin or for James Fish since I have been here, which is but a few days. I am an 'extra' and go from place to place relieving the regular men."

"Were there no undelivered message here when you took charge?"

"There are always plenty of unclaimed telegrams about an office like this. Here are a dozen or more." And the operator carelessly shuffled over a number of yellow envelopes. "There is nothing here for either name," he announced.

"Let me look them over, please," said the attorney.

"Certainly, there they are," said the man, handing them over.

Fish examined each envelope with care. "Here is one," he said presently, "for S. Marlin. Might that not be meant for Larkin?"

"Dunno," returned the operator. "'Twas here when I come. We can't deliver it; there don't seem to be any such man in town."

"Well, I will deliver it," said the lawyer, with sudden determination, as he tore off the end of the envelope and withdrew the message. It was sent from Denver under date of February 9, and read:

"Have found all I came for. Hope to reach Fulda on the 20th. SELTON."

Fish looked up from his reading with an expression of mingled triumph and disgust. "What is the matter with you people here?" he said. "This telegram is the one I have been waiting for. It left Denver on the ninth, got here a week ago, and in so garbled condition that nobody knows to whom it is addressed."

"Big storm West," answered the operator. "All wires were down and nothing from the vicinity of Denver reached us for more than a week. As to the address, mistakes will occur, you know."

Somewhat mollified, the lawyer said: "Remember, my name is James Fish, and I expect a very important telegram to-night. No matter what time it arrives, I want it delivered at once to my house. Neither does it matter if the message is addressed to Stephen Larkin, deliver it to me just the same."

He gave his house address and went out into the thronged street. "If I'm not much mistaken," he mused, "there'll be lively times in old Fulda to-morrow."

Before he visited the jail that evening Fish received two calls. One was a messenger boy, who brought a telegram from Selton saying that he had been delayed by a wreck, but would reach Fulda at eleven o'clock the next morning. The other was from a tall westerner, who introduced himself by saying:

"I am Palmer Bristol, from Golden, Colorado, where I am a notary public."

* * * * *

Every seat and every foot of space available for spectators was occupied in the courtroom on the second morning of Larkin's trial. The public curiosity

had only been whetted by the proceedings of the day before. Nothing new had been learned, nothing but the bald facts of the tragedy at Wyncross as they had been told and retold times without number. But the lawyer had given a definite promise to prove the innocence of his client, and the excitement grew apace as the prosecution drew near a close.

A ripple of intense interest swept over the courtroom when the accused, attended by his friends and family, entered, and there were many whispered comments upon his hopeful appearance.

For an hour the trial droned on, the evidence being merely a repetition of that already given, then, as the clock gave a preliminary alarm before striking the hour of eleven, Charles Barker, Larkin's neighbor, and Selton's intimate friend, got up and left the room, just as the prosecuting attorney introduced as conclusive evidence against the prisoner a long, keen clasp-knife, with the name "S. Larkin" carved in its white bone handle.

"This, gentlemen of the jury," he said, "is the cruel instrument that pierced the heart of the murdered man. You will observe that the name carved on the handle is that of the prisoner at the bar."

While the jury was making an examination of the sinister-looking knife Barker was at the railroad station shaking hands with a travel-stained man and acknowledging introductions to his several companions, all of whom had just alighted from an east-bound train.

"You are in good time, Selton," Barker answered to the inquiries of the latter. "The prosecution will surely rest its case at noon. Mr. Fish wanted me to have you go to the Fulda House for dinner, where he will call upon you before court opens this afternoon."

"Is there a man by the name of Bristol here?" Selton asked.

"Yes, and another named Allen, from Syracuse. Everything waits now for you."

"Well, I'm here, and my friends, as well as myself, are beastly hungry, so we'll get along over to the hotel," he said, as he started in company with Bierstein and the three cowboys, toward the hostelry.

The appearance of Selton and his companions in the courtroom that afternoon excited little or no comment. It was known that the detective had been away on an extended trip, and the presence of strangers at court was nothing new.

The clock had struck two when the lawyer got up to open the case for the defence.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, "I will not bore you with a long and unnecessary preamble. We are not guilty of the crime laid to our charge. We will not only prove our innocence, but will give you the name of the man who committed the murder. Will Stephen Larkin please take the stand?"

Larkin took the usual oath amid impressive silence, and, sitting down, turned his face toward the crowd of spectators. His counsel's first question caused a stir; it was:

"Are you the owner of the knife exhibited in this court?"

"It was mine at one time," was the direct answer.

"How long a time has elapsed since it left your possession?"

"I have not seen it before for eight years."

"Tell the court the circumstances under which you lost it."

A concise statement of the blizzard incident followed. "I had the knife when the Mexican came," the witness concluded, "when he went away it was missing, and I never saw it again until to-day."

The voices of the lawyer and his witness were the only sounds that broke the silence. Every person in the crowded room was listening intently to catch the significance of the slightest word, when there came a diversion at the door, which opened to admit a tall, blond young man, followed by a handsome and tastefully-dressed woman. Evidently these were people of some consequence, for they were preceded by the sheriff himself, who opened a passageway through the throng and conducted them straight inside the railing to where Larkin's party was seated. The judge frowned, Mr. Fish waited with a question on his lips, and the spectators craned their necks to catch a glimpse of those strangers, who, while the sheriff secured chairs for them, coolly shook hands with the Montanians, and, turning, gave to the prisoner a most cordial salutation. They were seated at last and Mr. Fish resumed his questioning.

"Had you been previously acquainted with the Mexican, Pedro Haurez?"

"I had met him on different occasions."

"What was his business, or vocation?"

"He was a cowboy, or cattle herder, in the employ of Harvey Richards, or 'Lawson,' as he called himself then."

Larkin gave his counsel a meaning glance, which the latter understood. "That will do for the present, Mr. Larkin," he said.

The prisoner turned his face toward the district attorney, as if expecting a cross-examination, but that functionary shook his head.

"I will not begin to cross-question until I get the lay of the land," he said.

The prisoner whispered to his counsel: "Call David Campbell, and ask him the same questions you would have asked me."

"Will Mr. David Campbell take the witness stand?" asked the lawyer.

The blond young man came forward and took the oath, answering all preliminary questions with manly directness.

"Mr. Campbell," asked the counsel, "have you any knowledge of the line of defence to be undertaken in this case?"

"No, sir. I have just arrived."

Mr. Fish took the clasp knife from the table and handed it to the witness. "Did you ever before see this knife?" he asked.

The witness examined the knife with care. "I have seen it a great many times," he answered; "but not for the past number of years."

"In whose possession was it when you last saw it?"

"It was in the possession of Stephen Larkin."

"Did Mr. Larkin ever explain to you how he came to part with it?"

"He always told me that he thought it was stolen from him by a Mexican cowboy, called Black Pede."

"Please tell the jury the full name of this Mexican, and in whose employ he was when you knew him."

"His full name was Pedro Haurez, and he was in the alleged employ of a man calling himself Lawson."

"Why do you say 'the alleged employ'?"

"Because it came out afterward that Lawson, or Richards, was the leader of a gang of cattle thieves, and his so-called employees were merely his accomplices."

"Had you any reason to believe that Haurez entertained a grudge against the chief of his band? If so, inform the jury your reasons for so believing."

Campbell turned to the jury and gave a concise account of the conversation overheard between the

Mexican and Englishman under the cliff by the spring, the absence of Pedro at the time of the raid on Lawson's ranch, and the subsequent finding of the girl Nita's body in a newly-made grave, near the buildings, finishing his story with the words: "Pedro undoubtedly had grounds for entertaining a grudge."

Lawyer Fish passed to the witness a dozen photographs of tough-looking men, printed on similar cards from which the artist's name had been removed. "Do you recognize any of these faces?" he asked.

Campbell examined the pictures at leisure, and, turning to the counsel, answered: "I recognize two. This is the picture of Pedro Haurez, otherwise known as 'Black Pede,'" extending one of the cards as he spoke, "and this," proffering another, "is the likeness of Lawson, or Richards, once a cattle stealer in Franklin county, Montana."

The pictures were passed round the jury box and returned to Mr. Fish.

"That is sufficient, Mr. Campbell," the latter said, "unless, Mr. District Attorney, you wish to question the witness."

"One question, Mr. Campbell," said the prosecuting attorney, "how can you be so certain in identifying so common a thing as a knife, after not having seen the same for more than eight years?"

"That is easy," Campbell answered, smiling. "Once, when Mr. Larkin and I were in Franklin City together, we bought two knives exactly alike, and had our names carved on the handles before we left the place where we got them. Mine, I have still, this knife is its mate."

"You are excused, Mr. Campbell," the lawyer said drily.

Eugene Allen, the Syracuse brakeman, was next called, and he gave to the jury an interesting ac-

count of the strange hobo he had harbored during his eastbound trip on the day of the tragedy. He told of the peculiar actions of his protégé, of the exchange of the earring for food, and finally of how, when the train had stopped at Fulda, another stow-away dropped from an empty box-car, who, after having inquired the way to Wyncross, hurried around a corner and out into the darkness, to be closely followed by the man the brakeman had fed.

"Mr. Allen," asked Lawyer Fish, "what disposition have you made of the earring you received from the hobo?"

"I have it in my pocket?"

"Please allow the members of the jury to examine it. Gentlemen of the jury, look well to this piece of gold, for we propose not only to produce its mate, but to trace the ownership to the man who committed the crime for which we are on trial. You will please observe that the name and address of the maker is engraved on the reverse side."

The unique jewel went the round of the jury and was returned to the table.

The photos shown to Campbell were next placed in the hands of the witness and he was asked to select which ones, if any, of the men pictured there had traveled on his train to Fulda on October 7th. While the spectators scarcely breathed, Allen selected one of the cards, handing it to Mr. Fish with the remark: "This is a picture of the dago who gave me the earring, and this," choosing another, "I believe is the man who sprang from the empty Fitchburg car, and asked me the way to Wyncross."

The jurymen pass the cards from man to man, a smile of satisfaction flitting over twelve faces when they discovered that the selection of Allen was identical with that of Campbell.

A somewhat rigid cross-examination having failed

to shake Allen's testimony, the name of J. Bierstein was called, and the sedate jeweler of Franklin City came forward and was sworn.

"Do you manufacture jewelry, Mr. Bierstein?" the counsel asked.

"I did at one time, but no more," was the reply.

"Are you familiar with the saddle design of earring, such as you see lying on the table before you?"

Bierstein examined the ornament with care. "I am familiar with *this* design," he said, "because it is one of my own. I made this earring, and my name and private mark are upon it."

"Are there many sets of these earrings extant?"

"There can be but one set of this particular design extant, as I manufactured but two sets, one of which is still in my possession."

"How did you dispose of the other?"

"It was sold, nearly ten years ago, to a Mexican cowboy named Pedro Haurez."

"You say that one pair of these earrings is still in your possession. Can you produce the duplicates?"

"I have them here," and the jeweler produced a pair of seemingly new earrings exactly like the one already examined by the jury.

Bierstein was shown the dozen photos. "Is the picture of Pedro Haurez among these?" he was asked.

The jeweler selected a card without hesitation. "This is he," he said; and for the third time the picture of the Mexican desperado went the round of the jury.

The district attorney asked but one question. "Do you know," he asked, "in whose possession the mate to this earring is?"

"This morning it was held by Mr. Zerah Selton," replied the witness quietly.

Selton was called and came to the stand in the

midst of a din bordering on applause; this was the first intimation given to the people that he was in any way connected with the case, and they recalled as one man the reputation given him by his many admirers: "Anything that Selton takes hold of *goes*," they had heard repeated a dozen times.

Lawyer Fish lost no time after his witness was sworn. "Mr. Selton," he said, "we are told that you have in your possession a mate to the earring here, is it true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please allow the jury to examine it."

The tiny gold saddle went the round of the jury, together with its mate, for examination and comparison. "You will observe, gentlemen of the jury," the lawyer said, "that the two now constitute a pair. Before you saw only the one intended for the right ear, now, the left one accompanies it. Look closely at the back of each piece; you will find there not only the name of Mr. Bierstein as manufacturer, but you will discover that the numbers are identical."

The ticking of the court room clock was the only audible sound as the tiny, though convincing arguments passed from hand to hand, then the lawyer again took up his questioning.

"When did this earring come into your possession, Mr. Selton?"

"Ten days ago at Golden, Colorado."

"Of whom did you obtain it?"

"Of a Mexican named Pedro Haurez."

The tension upon the nerves of every person in the audience had become terrific. The line of defence was just beginning to be understood, and in every step of its progress the prisoner's acquittal and complete exoneration seemed drawing near.

Larkin's mother was watching with the gratitude born of motherhood, the mobile face of Selton,

Helen's cheeks were glowing, her eyes sparkling with hope, while the long beard of Guy Kent was undergoing a stroking that threatened annihilation to his beloved facial ornament.

When Selton gave the name: "Haurez," in its peculiar Spanish pronunciation, from the depths of the crowd came an echo: "Hooray!" from a voice full of pent-up enthusiasm. In an instant the spirit of disorder was turned loose, and hundreds of stentorian voices were shouting: "Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!"

The presiding judge stood up, his face red with indignation. "Sheriff," he thundered, when he could make his voice heard, "clear the room! Turn out every man, woman and child not having actual business in this court!"

The executive hesitated, and His Honor cried sharply: "Do you hear me, sir?"

"Why, your Honor," stammered the poor sheriff, "I don't see how I can consistently turn these people out, for I hollered 'Hooray,' too."

A pause while the judge glowered at the executive officer of M—— county, then a plain-looking old man near the center of the room climbed upon a seat and addressed the court.

"May it please yer Honor," he said, respectfully, "I want t' say that I'm to blame fur this hull biz'-ness. I jes' het t' holler, er I'd a'bust. If yeh knowed Steve like we do, jedge, an' yeh seen thet things wus comin' his way, yeh'd a'hollered, too. These folks didn't mean no harm when they hollered, they jes' plum furgot. If y' won't put 'em out *this* time, I'll guarantee thet they won't holler ag'in less'n yeh say they kin. My name's Bannister, an' bein' th' hull cause of t' row, I'll go out if y' say so, tho' I'd powerful like t' stay."

Astonished at his own temerity, the old fellow

stood awkwardly shifting his hat from one hand to the other, as if awaiting an answer to his pathetic appeal.

The judge's wrath melted away, and there was something like moisture in the judicial eye as he said:

"The court will excuse the disorder, but it must not recur. Mr. Fish, you will proceed with the examination of the witness."

Old Bannister dropped out of sight, and the lawyer took up the thread where he had left off.

"You say you had the duplicate earring from Pedro Haurez. Where did you see this man?"

"At Golden, Colorado."

"Would you recognize his photograph?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"Here are a dozen photos. Please select the picture of Pedro Haurez from the lot."

The photograph chosen by the last three witnesses was selected without difficulty and held up for the inspection of the jury, who recognized it with smiles of intelligence.

"Mr. Selton," said the lawyer, "I will excuse you for the present, but may call you back later."

Selton was about to leave the stand when the prosecuting attorney interposed a question.

"You say that you had the earring from the man Haurez within the past fortnight, and that you saw him at Golden, Colorado. May I ask how you came to be in that far distant city?"

"Yes, sir. I was in search of Pedro Haurez."

"And you found him. Now, having in your own mind completely established his complicity in this crime, you being an officer of the law, why did you not arrest him and bring him before this court?"

"Because he is dead."

"A-h-h!" gasped the prosecutor, and an audible tit-

ter passed around the room as the witness took his seat.

"Will Mr. Palmer Bristol be sworn?" suggested Mr. Fish in his suavest tone.

A tall, hatchet-faced westerner, heavily moustached and with the eye of a hawk, advanced to the witness stand and took the oath amid breathless silence.

"Mr. Bristol," interrogated the attorney for the defense, "where do you reside, and what is your business?"

"Golden, Colorado, a magistrate and notary public," was the direct reply.

"Do you know Mr. Selton, the last witness?"

"I met him for the first time about two weeks ago."

"Under what circumstances did you meet him?"

"He sent for me to take the ante-mortem statement and deposition of a dying man."

"Will you name the man to whose bedside you were called?"

"He was a Mexican by the name of Pedro Hau-rez."

"How came you to know that the man was dying?"

"I had the opinion of the best physician in Golden, and the fact that he died six hours later was sufficient guaranty of the doctor's judgment."

"Was there any particular secret of which the Mexican wished to divest his mind before his demise?"

"Yes, he had committed a murder of which he did not repent, but he gave the deposition to clear an innocent man who was accused of the crime."

"Does this sworn deposition have a bearing on the case now before this court?"

"It does."

"Is the document in your possession?"

"It is, and also the doctor's certificate of death and its cause."

"Please produce both documents for the benefit of the court."

A formidable looking document, having a great seal attached, and a small folded paper, were brought forth and passed to the judge, who perused them while an oppressive silence filled the place. He finished at last and, beckoning to a lawyer sitting near, said:

"Sir, are you interested in any way in this case?"

"Only as a spectator," was the reply.

"Then you will confer a favor on the court by reading this deposition to the jury. Please make your enunciation clear so that every word may be understood."

The attorney took the paper, and in a clear voice, beginning with the formula, "I, Pedro Haurez, being of sound mind and conscious of the near approach of my demise, do hereby solemnly swear and affirm," etc., etc., read the whole story of the Mexican's wrongs, his hatred, his thirst for revenge, the watchful vigilance he had kept over the whereabouts and movements of his victim, the sleepless, tireless shadowing halfway across the continent of one would-be murderer by another, the exciting tale ending with how, under the shed at Wyncross, he had plunged into the body of his enemy the knife he had stolen from Stephen Larkin so many years before. Then the doctor's certificate was read, adding the last link to the chain of evidence.

A pause, broken only by the ticking of a clock and the short, excited respiration of the spectators, then the judge spoke again.

"Mr. Bristol," he said, "unless Mr. Fish or the attorney for the people wish to question you further, you may retire."

As neither attorney showed such disposition, the witness stand was vacated, and His Honor said: "I observe that the names of two persons as sworn witnesses are attached to Haurez's deposition; they are those of Zerah Selton and Alexander Miller. Please recall Mr. Selton, and then have Mr. Miller sworn."

Selton returned, and related the circumstances under which the dying Mexican had made his confession; then came Aleck Miller, bashful, timid as a schoolgirl, bronzed to the eyes by wind and sun, a manly young athlete, but upon whom the "store clothes" which he wore sat awkwardly.

"Mr. Miller," asked the lawyer, "were you acquainted with a Mexican cowboy named Pedro Haurez?"

"I reckon I wasn't what y' might call acquainted with him, boss, fur he didn't range in my bunch; but I knowed him when I seen him."

"Please select his picture from those on the table before you."

Aleck did so, and the counsel resumed: "Were you present, on the tenth of the present month, in a room at Golden, Colorado, where this man, Haurez, lay dying of a pistol shot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the jury all that happened there."

Corroboration of all that Selton had sworn to followed in the breezy language of the plains, and the witness was about to leave the stand when the prosecuting attorney asked a question.

"Mr. Miller," he said, "was this deposition obtained under duress?"

Aleck glared on the lawyer, whom he regarded as an enemy to his friend Larkin, and burst out: "Naw, it was got from under 'n old Navajo blanket."

The whole court tittered. The witness flushed a

dangerous red, and the questioner grew uncomfortable, but he continued:

"I fear you do not understand, Mr. Miller. I mean was anything done to frighten or force the deponent into making the confession just read before the court?"

"Oh! you mean did ennyone try t' *scare* him," returned Aleck, somewhat mollified. "Well, yes, boss; an onary galloot of a greaser moseyed up in there; he hed it in fur Pede, an' he reckoned on razoooin' him. Pede didn't come under th' rope tho', an' when we'd hed enough, I slid th' greaser down th' stair trail with th' toe o' my boot."

The titter now became a general laugh, even the judicial face losing its dignity.

"That will do, Mr. Miller," said the attorney, and Aleck returned to his seat, conscious of having done a little toward helping his friend, but wondering in a vague way what he had said to provoke laughter.

Lawyer Fish once more addressed the court, "Your Honor, and gentlemen of the jury," he said, "our evidence is all in, and we are ready to leave our case in your hands." He would have continued, but the judge interrupted him with a gesture, and himself addressed the jury.

"Gentlemen," he began, "you have heard the evidence for both the prosecution and the defense. The first was entirely circumstantial in its nature, actually proving nothing against the accused. The second has link by link established a chain of evidence leading straight up to the real perpetrator of the crime, who has confessed his guilt under conditions so solemn and so disinterested as to leave no doubt as to the innocence of the prisoner at the bar. I now direct you to find a verdict of not guilty without leaving the jury box."

The district attorney was on his feet like a shot.

"Your Honor," he cried, "you are surely aware that you are establishing a dangerous precedent. There is not a statute in the laws of the state that will admit this deposition as evidence. It——"

"Enough!" thundered the judge. "I may be establishing a *precedent*, but it is one based upon the laws of common sense and humanity. If dangerous, I will accept the responsibility. Gentlemen of the jury, have you found a verdict?"

"We have," announced the foreman, rising. "We find the prisoner not guilty of the crime laid to his charge."

The judge came down from his seat and grasped Larkin's hand. "Mr. Larkin," he said, "let me congratulate you on the thorough manner in which your innocence has been established, and allow me the pleasure of informing you that you are free to go where you please, and that no stain rests upon your fair name."

A moment the enthusiastic crowd waited while Larkin kissed his mother's grateful, tear-stained face and tendered the same salute to his young wife, then old Bannister sprang once more upon his seat and piped out:

"Kin we holler now, Jedge?"

His Honor nodded, and the spirit of disorderly enthusiasm was turned loose once more. Men threw their hats to the ceiling and yelled themselves hoarse, while scores of screaming women stood on benches frantically waving veils and handkerchiefs. Some genius ran to an anteroom, and, grasping the rope, set the courthouse bell to proclaiming the tidings to the outside world. Soon the church and school bells caught the infection, and out in the railroad yard several locomotive whistles contributed to the joyful din.

Quiet was restored when Charles Barker stood up

near the judge's chair and waved his hand for silence.

"Friends and neighbors," he said, "it is quite right to rejoice over the happy vindication of our beloved neighbor Larkin, but it seems to me that much honor is due, too, to the man whose astute mind was first to grasp the true situation, and to whose intelligent and tireless effort in discovering the real criminal Mr. Larkin owes this early termination of his troubles. Long life and happiness to Zerah Selton!"

"Selton! Selton! Selton!" roared the jubilant mob, nor would it be satisfied until the man himself had mounted the platform and bowed his acknowledgments.

Then Guy Kent made a short speech characteristic of the man.

"Ev'rybody is our friends," he announced, "and when I say ev'rybody, I mean it. I take th' liberty of invitin' ev'rybody, young and old, in this hull country to Stephen Larkin's place to-morrer. Come early in the mornin' and come prepared to stay all day. We'll promise yeh somethin' t' eat, and lots of it. We'll promise t' show yeh some things yeh don't never see in th' East. Don't furgit that *ev'rybody* hes an invitation."

Night was falling when Larkin, having shaken hands with nearly every man, woman and child present, descended the courthouse steps to the street, where carriages were waiting to convey him and his western friends to his home in Wyncross.

The ride was one never to be forgotten. Everywhere lights gleamed in the windows of farmhouse and cottage, and the inhabitants, knowing that Larkin would pass that way, assembled at their gates to cheer him or to bid him godspeed.

At Bronson Farm all was warmth and cheer and jollity that night. The ranchmen recited over again

the oft told reminiscences of the range; the cowboys in fancy once more roasted under the summer sun, fought for existence in the terrible cold of winter, brought half wild horses into subjection, ran down and punished cattle thieves, cut out, roped and branded cattle, spent long, solitary nights out under the stars. There were games and music and pleasant chat until long past midnight, then one by one the guests said "Good night," leaving only the Larkins in the cozy sitting room, mother, son and wife.

Helen, intent on some household duty, left the room, and the mother, going up to her son, drew his head down that she might kiss his lips.

"My son," she said, "I have seen much sorrow and some joy in my life. I have seen many times when I thought that the Lord had turned his face away from me, times when the sun seemed hidden forever. To-night my cup is overflowing with happiness, my heart with joy and thankfulness now that we are freed from the terrible ordeal of the past few months. Surely 'Sorrow endureth but a night. Joy cometh in the morning.'" ✦

"Amen, dear mother!" responded the son from his full heart, "and may we all be long spared to bless each other's hearts."

Another long, happy embrace, and the mother sought her rest.

Impelled by a feeling of restlessness, Larkin went out on the open piazza. The weather was mild and already a breath of spring pervaded the air. A light step and Helen was by his side. His arm passed caressingly around her, though neither spoke. Together they looked toward the silent east, where a few fleecy clouds were floating in the pale light of coming day. Suddenly the sky cleared and a great white star shone forth.

* I am true !

"O, Stephen!" cried Helen, in a low, tense voice. "See the star! An *omen*! An *omen*!"

Her husband's clasp tightened about her waist.

"Yes, darling wife," he said. "I believe it is an omen and a happy one. Once, while I was passing through a season of doubt and trouble, that same star shone on the fruition of my dearest hope. I have never observed it closely since that time, but to-night, when our troubles seem all overcome, it shines for us as an omen of happier times."

She looked into his eyes by the growing light, understanding what she saw there, and together they passed through the open door.

THE END.

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